

**Preparing for the Expanding Role of Cybervolunteerism in the New Millennium:  
An Application of the ROPES Model of Public Relations**

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**Abstract**

*Given the continued expansion of technology into everyday life for large segments of the American public, nonprofit organizations have to consider implementing cybervolunteer programs if they seek to retain volunteers in the new millennium. The ROPES model of public relations provides an outline for an organization to introduce new concepts and foster relationship growth with targeted audiences. This article outlines how the ROPES model (i.e., Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation, Stewardship) may be used to introduce cybervolunteerism successfully into nonprofit organizations.*

**Key Words:**

cybervolunteerism, virtual, volunteers, cyber, public relations, strategic planning, technology

**Introduction**

In 2008, 61.8 million people volunteered with nonprofit organizations to work more than 8 billion hours (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Using The Independent Sector's (2009) estimated value for each hour volunteered in 2008 of \$20.25, the value of this 2008 volunteer time is an estimated \$162 billion dollars. During the current economic downturn in the United States that began in 2006, nonprofits have seen an increase in the number of adults volunteering their time to help deliver charitable programs and services. The Corporation for National and Community Service reports that 37% of nonprofits increased the number of volunteers engaged between September 2008 and March 2009

and that nearly half foresee the number of volunteers increasing in the coming year (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2009).

Nonprofit organizations must think strategically about expanding volunteer programs given these and other changes in contemporary society, and especially technological advances. Americans from every generation are increasing their Internet usage at astounding rates. The average U.S. adult nearly doubled her/his daily use of the Internet between 2006 and 2008, spending an average of 2.1 hours per day online in 2006 compared to 3.8 hours in 2008, an 81% increase over three years (Media Audit, 2008). To capitalize on this technological shift, nonprofit organizations must consider

recruiting cybervolunteers to help manage organizational activities, including administration as well as program delivery and services. Norris (2003) recommended that nonprofit organizations reach out to those interested in remote volunteering via the Internet because they aid in increasing the organizations' abilities to increase awareness of and participation in their programs as well as helping manage administrative tasks, such as web site and database maintenance.

Cybervolunteering allows individuals to "conduct their activities for agencies or clients over the Internet, in whole or in part" (Cravens, 2000, p. 121). The concept is very similar to telecommuting, except that instead of online employees, these are online volunteers. Many individuals actively search for volunteer opportunities they can complete from home because of time constraints, personal preference, disabilities, or home-based obligations that prevent them from volunteering onsite. Cybervolunteering allows anyone with access to the Internet to contribute time and energy to nonprofit organizations in a meaningful way.

There are many ways that cybervolunteerism could be implemented into nonprofit organizations' activities. For example, volunteers that like to write could edit and produce an organization's newsletter or manage its presence on social networking sites, like Facebook or Twitter. Volunteers interested in public policy could conduct legislative research online to see how the nonprofit could maximize its lobbying efforts. Accountants could reconcile an organization's financial accounts via the Internet, and bilingual individuals could help an organization with translation of print materials. All of these tasks and many others could be accomplished by a volunteer without her/him working at the organization's actual

physical site if the volunteer resource manager properly screens, orients, and supervises the volunteer.

In the early years of the new millennium, several authors identified cybervolunteerism as a major trend in volunteerism for which volunteer resource managers must be prepared (Culp & Nolan, 2000; Merrill & Safrit, 2003; Safrit & Merrill, 2002). However, despite the growing research on cybervolunteerism (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Cravens, 2000; Harrison & Murray, 2004), searches for cybervolunteer opportunities on VolunteerMatch.org and NetworkforGood.org produced few results. Many nonprofit organizations appear to have questions about how to implement a cybervolunteer program in a thorough, effective manner. The purpose of this article is to explore how the discipline of public relations could provide volunteer resource managers a framework that could be used to implement cybervolunteerism into their existing volunteer programs.

### **An Overview of the ROPES Model of Public Relations**

The public relations discipline offers a number of models that guide the communication process between organizations and their key publics or audiences. One of the most common process models in public relations is ROPES, an acronym representing the model's components of research, objectives, programming, evaluation, and stewardship (Kelly, 2001; Wilcox, 2005). The ROPES model could act as a strategic guide for organizations seeking to build and maintain a relationship with cybervolunteers through an ongoing cybervolunteerism program.

The first step of the process, research, prepares organizations to communicate effectively with their key audiences (Hendrix & Hayes, 2007) through

thorough information gathering on the audience, on the organization's preparedness, and on the situation to be addressed in communication. This first step in the process lays the foundation for the campaign or program that will develop.

After research has been conducted, an organization that wishes to effectively engage with an audience must set objectives that will guide behavior to a successful end. Objectives address not only the outcomes that the organization hopes to reach with the intended audience, but also the specific behaviors that the organization itself hopes to enact to reach those goals. Objectives are reached through thorough planning and implementation, which occurs in the next step, programming (Wilcox, 2005), during which organizations engage in planned actions (such as events or sponsorship), planned use of media, and effective communication strategies. The key to an effective programming plan is creating a theme that guides the overall program (Hendrix & Hayes). An organization could learn a great deal from both the successful aspects and unsuccessful aspects of its campaigns or programs through evaluation, which should occur both during a campaign or program and after its completion (Wilcox). By measuring the degree to which the organization reached its objectives as well as the effectiveness with which it delivered key messages, an organization could gather useful information that will allow it to build on past mistakes and produce higher quality programs in the future (Hendrix & Hayes).

The final step of a campaign or program is stewardship. As Kelly (2001) suggested, "It is easier to keep a friend than to make a new friend" (p. 279), i.e., cultivating relationships that already exist between an organization and a public is a much more efficient strategy than trying to create new relationships. New programs and

campaigns often lead to new relationships, and cultivating those relationships by continuing to maintain the relationship is an important part of the communication and program planning process (Kelly).

### **Applying the ROPES Model to Cybervolunteerism**

Prior to beginning any cybervolunteerism efforts, a nonprofit, volunteer based organization must conduct basic research to assess its readiness to implement the program. Following the ROPES model, research must be conducted on the organization, the potential cybervolunteers, and the overarching concept of cybervolunteerism and its role in the organization (Hendrix & Hayes). In academics, research takes a structured, formal appearance adhering to the guidelines of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Smith (2009) pointed out that these are sound guidelines for practitioners as well; however, organizations often face time and resources challenges that scholarly researchers may not face. For these reasons, research in the ROPES model includes both formal and informal approaches ranging from surveys of randomly sampled populations and focus groups of recruited individuals, to casual conversations with key stakeholders and reviews of media coverage and policy documents.

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing nonprofits is actually introducing cybervolunteerism into the organization (Ellis & Cravens, 2000). It is important to begin this task by asking questions about how paid staff view volunteers and the potential of the Internet. Many nonprofit staff members feel that volunteer resource management is already time-consuming and that adding a cybervolunteer program would only confound the problem. Others may feel that the introduction of cybervolunteers may

be an attempt to replace the existing onsite volunteering program. Paid staff may also pose questions of the nonprofit organization's ability to manage someone whose progress cannot be easily monitored. Given an organization's existing resources, questions often arise about the practicalities of cybervolunteering when the concept is introduced.

To answer paid staff members' questions about cybervolunteerism, volunteer resource managers must fully research the situation, according to the ROPES model. In this scenario, volunteer resource managers must fully understand the dynamics of online culture. Learning to communicate primarily through the written word (either in the form of e-mail or instant messages) may be a challenge for those accustomed to face-to-face conversations (Zigurs, 2003). E-mail conversations introduce many problems that do not exist in onsite volunteering efforts, including the misinterpretation of tone or intent of the message and sending messages too frequently or not often enough in addition, to simpler problems such as grammar, spelling, and the overuse of Internet abbreviations and emoticons (i.e., visual representations of emotion using punctuation symbols). Fortunately, some of these problems could be eliminated through the use of Web cam technologies and programs such as Skype or Yahoo! Messenger that facilitate face-to-face conversations (Amichai-Hamburger, 2008).

Another element of virtual communication that should be investigated is the paid staff's interest in virtual communication through various channels. Volunteer resource managers should encourage nonprofit paid staff to interact with cybervolunteers even though they are not onsite through online forums or discussion groups in addition to e-mail (Ellis & Cravens, 2000). Group discussions, even

when done virtually, could result in team building and instill feelings of pride in the work that is being done for the organization. Public relations research suggests that relationship building leads to high quality volunteer experiences (Bortree & Waters, 2008). Feelings of encouragement are vital in situations where interpersonal interaction are lacking as they prevent the volunteers from feeling as if they are doing the work alone. Additionally, communication could be facilitated through social networking sites by sending messages to volunteer individuals or groups and sharing photographs and videos. For employees still hesitant about cybervolunteerism, volunteer resource managers could encourage them to be more receptive to the idea by increasing e-mail communication with onsite volunteers before becoming fully involved with cybervolunteers.

One final element of the online culture that volunteer resource managers must investigate and ultimately explain to their paid staff colleagues involves the management of virtual work. Many are resistant to incorporate cybervolunteerism into their programs and services because it involves the sacrifice of immediate supervision of volunteers (Ellis & Cravens). However, through proper screening procedures, including an in-depth interview and reference checking, volunteer resource managers may ensure that potential cybervolunteers are as trustworthy, professional, and dedicated to the organization's mission as an onsite volunteer. Because the cybervolunteer may work remotely outside of the organization's operating hours, cybervolunteer supervisors will have to define parameters of how often updates are needed on the work being done virtually (Amichi-Hamburger, 2008).

The ROPES model also stipulates that research must be done on the organization's publics (Hendrix & Hayes,

2007). In this case, publics refer to those who would be cybervolunteers. It is important for organizations to identify not only potential areas for virtual volunteer work but also potential cybervolunteers. Research suggests that volunteers be assessed for their preparedness for cybervolunteerism activities (Cravens, 2000). Turnover among cybervolunteers tends to be high; however, volunteers who bring expertise and those who are highly committed to the organization's values and mission experience the highest degree of longevity (Cravens, 2006). The volunteer's experience and comfort with technology contributes to success as well (Ellis & Cravens, 2000). Assessing preparation can prevent the nonprofit organization from wasting valuable resources on unprepared and inappropriate volunteers. Further, nonprofit organizations should identify the skills needed and then seek volunteers with those talents. This could be done through using established volunteer recruitment channels such as online volunteer matching services or through organizations like the Taproot Foundation, which recruits business professionals to volunteer their skills with charitable organizations.

Once the prospects have been identified, it is important for nonprofit organizations to develop safety guidelines to protect all of the individuals involved in the cybervolunteer program. Virtual work involves potential hazards, such as exposure to computer viruses that could cripple an organization's entire network, the theft of confidential personal information, and the potential for exposure to adult-oriented or inappropriate material online. The Virtual Volunteering Project (2007) recommended that organizations develop safety guidelines for all individuals involved that have four goals: (1) protection of privacy and personal information; (2) screening out people who would abuse or exploit the

organization's computer systems; (3) preventing opportunities for the exploitation of participants; and (4) protection of youth and teenage volunteers from exposure to inappropriate online materials.

The second element of the ROPES model involves developing goals and objectives for the program (Hendrix & Hayes). Kim (2001) recommended that organizational efforts not be started without thoroughly assessing what the final outcomes of a program should be. With a clear goal in mind, it is much easier for the organization's paid staff and volunteer resource manager to incorporate behaviors and policies that will ensure programmatic success.

It is important for nonprofit organizations considering cybervolunteerism to have an overall goal for the program and not to launch the program blindly. Whether the goal involves expanding the number of cybervolunteers or increasing specific types of virtual work, organizations should carefully think about what they can actually manage while balancing management of the onsite volunteer program and other day-to-day activities. A study of the most successful cybervolunteer programs found that they included an extensive recruitment and screening process, resources to maintain timely communication with volunteers, and personnel resources dedicated specifically to cybervolunteers (Cravens, 2006). Building these elements into the strategic plan will help facilitate a successful program.

While having an overall goal for the cybervolunteer program is a good start, organizations must also do some careful strategic planning to benefit from these efforts. Such strategic planning will allow organizations to develop measurable objectives with deadlines. An example of an appropriate objective might be, "To produce and distribute a monthly e-newsletter to the organization's donor database by the 20th of

every month.” By crafting objectives in this manner, the volunteer and the volunteer resource manager both know exactly what has to be done and when with each volunteering project. Quantifiable objectives also provide boundaries for accountability (Hon, 1998), including how to determine whether a volunteer upheld her/his end of the volunteer contract.

The ROPES model is designed to ensure that practitioners do not rush into situations without thoroughly being prepared. The research in the first step followed by a strategic assessment of the program’s purpose leads to the third element, programming (Hendrix & Hayes, 2007). This step involves the deliberate planning, creation, and implementation of the program itself. Smith (2009) encouraged organizations to conduct brainstorming activities to identify an array of strategies for program implementation, but cautioned that this activity needs to be balanced with an assessment of practicality and necessity to ensure that the goals and objectives are reached.

In regards to cybervolunteerism, it is important to establish support and commitment within the nonprofit organization, and specifically within the organization’s management structure (Cnaan & Cascio, 1999). It is necessary to get the organization’s leaders on board with the cybervolunteer program to ensure that appropriate resources are allocated within the organization (Markham, Johnson, & Bonjean, 1999). Once leaders are committed to the program, it may be helpful to conduct an in-house training on cybervolunteers for all of the organization’s paid employees. By conducting such a workshop, everyone could openly discuss their fears and their hopes for the new endeavor. The volunteer resource manager could take this time to demonstrate that managing cybervolunteers is not all that

different from managing onsite volunteers. Additionally, this training could provide any technical training (e.g., how to use instant messaging or Web cam technology) for paid staff who may be involved with cybervolunteers (Peña-López, 2007).

Strategic planning in the programming phase of the ROPES process includes developing written guidelines for implementation of the program (Hendrix & Hayes). This plan should include the goals and objectives that were created during the second step, but it should also include everything used to carry out the new cybervolunteer program. The written plan should include a listing of resources needed for the program, including finances needed for technology and potential upgrades as well as the amount of paid staff time needed to monitor the cybervolunteers; a timeline detailing when individual program components should be carried out and by whom; and the individual tactics and communication messages that will be used during the program. Research suggests that the key elements of a successful cybervolunteer program includes a training program, clear channels of communication, and clearly defined assignments for cybervolunteers (Cravens, 2006). Other strategies could include both offline (e.g., newsletters, fliers, face-to-face conversations) and online (e.g., web site sections, social networking sites, e-mail) strategies to communicate about the new cybervolunteer program.

Implementation of a cybervolunteer program would involve the promotion of the new program, recruitment and interviewing potential cybervolunteers, and ultimately implementing and supervising individual cybervolunteer efforts. During the implementation phase, it is important for those in charge of the program to monitor its progress (Fairchild, 2002). If a message is not resonating with audiences or if a

particular communication tactic is not reaching the audience, the plan should be adjusted. Even though research is the first step of the ROPES model, it ultimately is present in all of the steps. Volunteer resource managers have to be proactive with the cybervolunteer program's implementation to ensure resources being devoted to the program are used effectively and efficiently.

Once the cybervolunteer program has been launched and is underway, the evaluation step of the ROPES model can be implemented. Evaluation is simply an assessment of the cybervolunteer program's goals and objectives (Smith, 2009). Fortunately, this step is relatively simple if the objectives have been written in a measurable fashion. By creating deadlines for each effort, volunteer resource managers know when specific volunteer activities should be completed. Areas of evaluation in a cybervolunteer program would include evaluating the effectiveness of the volunteer work completed, the engagement of cybervolunteers with paid staff, and the retention of cybervolunteers (Ellis & Cravens, 2000). The objectives provide direction in determining whether the volunteer activity was achieved. Using the example presented in the objectives step, the volunteer resource manager simply needs to determine first if the e-newsletter was distributed to everyone in the donor database and second if the e-newsletter was received by the 20th of every month.

The evaluation of the program involving cybervolunteering provides benchmarking numbers that could be used to evaluate the overall success of the program. In addition to being able to determine whether individual cybervolunteer projects were successful, benchmarking allows organizations to demonstrate the entire scope of the cybervolunteer program. Growth of the program and repeated

successes by cybervolunteers give nonprofit organizations anecdotal stories that they may share with individual, corporate, and foundation donors that help reinforce the good deeds being carried out by the nonprofit organization and its cybervolunteers.

The final step of the ROPES model involves stewardship, i.e., the cultivation of relationships with cybervolunteers and the volunteer resource manager in this scenario. Given the continued need for cybervolunteers, it is important to understand the components of relationship building, or stewardship, as defined in public relations literature. Kelly (2001) identified four aspects of stewardship that must be incorporated into the cybervolunteerism program to ensure its longevity. The first element of stewardship is reciprocity, which insists that cybervolunteers be recognized and thanked in a gracious manner. Nonprofit organizations must let their cybervolunteers know that their work is appreciated. Next, organizations have to behave responsibly in the interactions with cybervolunteers. As mentioned earlier, the Virtual Volunteering Project recommends that nonprofit organizations ensure cybervolunteers' personal information is protected. Responsible behavior also involves assigning cybervolunteers to the specific tasks that they were recruited to accomplish and giving them work that is appropriate for the identified skills they bring to the nonprofit organization.

Reporting is the third element of stewardship. Because cybervolunteers are not onsite, they may not learn about organizational news and updates. It is important that those supervising cybervolunteers keep them informed about everything that impacts the organization and their work. The communication flow helps engage cybervolunteers and makes them feel

as if they are a vital part of the organization even though they are not onsite. Ultimately, this involvement is the key to the final element of stewardship, relationship nurturing. The entire nonprofit organization, and not just the volunteer resource manager, has to keep everyone in mind when making organizational decisions. Even though cybervolunteers are not onsite, they provide an important component to the overall management of the organization and the delivery of the nonprofit organization's programs and services. These relationships have to be nurtured for them to grow and prosper.

### Conclusions

The ROPES model provides a strategic framework for launching new endeavors. The five individual steps of conducting research, establishing objectives, program development and implementation, evaluation, and stewardship were developed by public relations scholars who used organizational communication and management principles to create this strategic model. Given the increasing prevalence of technology in the lives of all Americans, volunteer resource managers should consider adopting the principles of the ROPES model to introduce cybervolunteerism into a nonprofit organization. By using currently available technology, nonprofit organizations could not only become more inclusive by reaching out to busy professionals who have valuable skills but cannot volunteer onsite during normal operating hours, and to individuals with disabilities and others who may not have the abilities to volunteer onsite.

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