

Research Findings Scotland No 7

The Role of Asking

This Research Findings Scotland is the seventh in a series of bulletins on research into volunteering in Scotland published by Volunteer Development Scotland. The findings are taken from a qualitative research study into 'Asking' which forms part of Volunteer Development Scotland's contribution to Year of the Volunteer 2005 Scotland.

Background to the Research

60% of adults in Scotland feel that they have never been asked to volunteer, (VDS, 2004) with the highest levels in particular from those in lower socio-economic groups. Added to this finding is the knowledge that the majority of people in Scotland are supportive of volunteering and are willing to be involved as a volunteer. Therefore, research was needed to better understand the notion that people feel they have not been asked to volunteer, and to explore whether this is the case and how people feel about it. The research also sought to assess a strategy behind a potential communications campaign, and to test imagery that might be used.

Method and Sample

TNS System Three were commissioned to run four consumer focus groups. The consumers were segmented by volunteering status and by socio-economic group and age. The focus groups were run in March 2005 and comprised:

- 2 non-volunteer groups (BC1 30-40 & C2D 45-60)
- 1 volunteer group (BC1C2 45-60)
- 1 lapsed volunteer group (BC1C2 30-44)

The Main Findings

1. Perceptions of volunteering amongst non-volunteers

There was relatively little knowledge of volunteering amongst non-volunteers. The associations with volunteering were generic, for example, helping the sick, helping children and young people, helping the elderly, charity shops, and street collectors. There was awareness of specific volunteer-involving organisations. Participants cited the following: Scouts, Boy's Brigade, Guides, Childrens' Panel, Samaritans, and VSO, some of which had run recent, high profile volunteer recruitment campaigns. However, there was little knowledge of the actual activities or opportunities undertaken by volunteers.

Perceptions of *who* volunteers were seen initially in functional terms. Volunteers were seen as people with a lot of spare time - the assumption being that volunteering requires a substantial time commitment, older people – the visible face of volunteering through charity shops and more likely to have more spare time, and wealthier or financially independent people – they don't need to work and therefore have more time. In terms of emotional perceptions, volunteers were seen as people who want to give something back to society or to an organisation or issue that has personal resonance. Volunteers are perceived to be kind, patient, lonely or dedicated to a cause.

2. Perceptions of volunteering amongst lapsed and current volunteers

The motivations for becoming a volunteer were consistent with the findings of other research. For some the motivation had been a life event or an emotional association with a cause, or repaying help received in the past, or to gain experience in another line of work, or to give something back to society. For others it was part of their family's culture and for those who had been with an organisation from childhood it was the next logical step.

The perception of *who* volunteers was that there is not 'one type' of volunteer, but that volunteers share characteristics – egalitarian spirit, committed, motivated and enthusiastic – in that sense they are similar people.

There have been changes over time in how current volunteers perceive volunteering. The changes were identified as being:

- Perception that people have less time today
 - Employers are not as flexible
 - People work more
- Today there is more 'red tape'
 - Police checks, forms to fill out
 - Moral panics – paedophilia etc.
 - More regular need for training
 - Threat of litigation
 - Concerns over having to pay for security checks

However, these are not sufficiently severe in order to make current volunteers stop or consider stopping volunteering at present.

Lapsed volunteers no longer volunteer for a variety of reasons –

- Life stage reasons – marriage and/or children mean changes in priorities
- Some felt they were being asked to give more and more of their time
- Some felt they were taken for granted
- Others believed they had done their bit and it was now up to others

With regards to going back to volunteering some lapsed volunteers are happy to do so once they have more time but see this as being relatively far off in the future. Others said it would have to be an opportunity that was of interest to them and right for them. For most a return to volunteering at a later stage was dependent on their experience of volunteering. Those who had a positive experience thought that they probably go back to volunteering, whereas those who had a negative experience were not sure to return although some thought that they might get involved again if asked through the school or another organisation closely connected to benefits for their children. But there was little evidence to suggest that people would actively look for another volunteering opportunity.

Barriers to volunteering for non-volunteer

There are several perceptual barriers to volunteering:

- Time
- Lack of knowledge about volunteering
- Fear of being unable to stop volunteering
- Lack of skills to perform activity

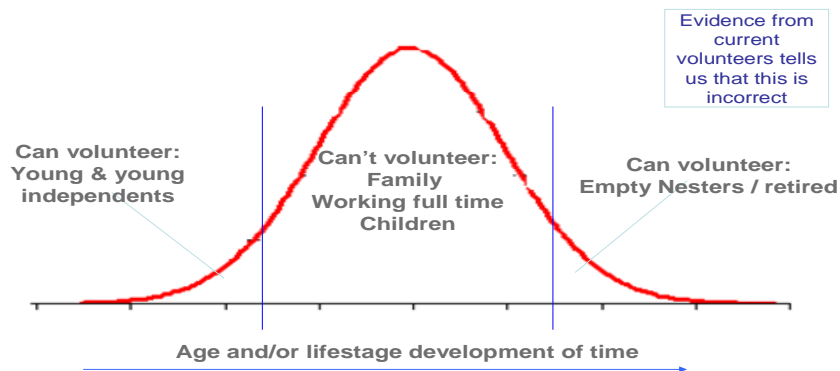
Time is considered the most preventative factor. This is borne out of the perception that volunteering will take up substantial amounts of time. Most perceptions were based on a weekly commitment of around 3-4 hours. Individuals felt that between full time working, wanting to spend time with their children in the evening and at the weekend that they could not justify giving time to volunteering.

There was also a fear of the unknown. 'What would be expected of me?', 'How would I know what to do?', 'Do I have the right kinds of skills?', 'Would I be doing something I really hate?', 'Could I cope emotionally with what is being asked of me?'

Another concern was being able to stop without feeling guilty. Once committed to volunteering would more and more be asked of them? How would they stop volunteering without feeling that they were letting people down? It is interesting to note that the fears of the non-volunteers were experienced and articulated by the lapsed volunteers.

Perceptions of volunteering vs actual picture

The perception of non and lapsed volunteers that volunteers are older people with time to spare is not borne out in other research by VDS and others which has found that it is young people and those of middle age who are the most likely to be involved as volunteers. Therefore, non and lapsed volunteers share a perception of volunteering that is different to the picture of current volunteers.



The Role of Asking

Most of the current and lapsed volunteers had been asked to become volunteers through a range of ways such as through their children's activities or through friendly conversation in a social setting. They had been asked by a trusted or authoritative source. Indeed being asked face to face by a trusted source was the most effective method of recruitment, and their preferred method.

Almost all the non-volunteers had never been asked to volunteer. Those that had been asked still were not volunteering. They had been asked to do something they did not want to do, or not provided with enough information on what was expected of them, and this allowed them to convince themselves not to volunteer.

There is potential for the role of asking non-volunteers if the asking is done by someone known to the individual. This breeds trust that they will not be duped into something they are not suitable for or do not enjoy. However, it must be recognised that the individual may be less likely to be able to decline the invitation.

Once engaged in discussion about becoming a volunteer, people want to enter into a negotiation with the volunteer-involving organisation regarding the amount of time they want to give and what they want to do.

Recruitment Messages and Images

Whilst word of mouth is the most popular route into volunteering (VDS, 2004), the use of messages and images on posters and leaflets still have a role to play in the recruitment of volunteers.

The focus groups' preference was for messages that are benefit led, i.e. the benefit of volunteering to the recipient or the community, and provide an indication of the time commitment. The benefit to others is seen to have the best fit with the notion of volunteering.

There was some support for messages that state the benefit to the volunteer, but these are seen as applying more to young people and those seeking skills development and experience through volunteering.

Messages that convey that the organisation is desperate for volunteers were rejected outright as they are seen as emotional blackmail, and reinforced non-volunteers' fears of never being able to get out of volunteering. This is supported by lapsed volunteers' feelings of guilt when attempting to stop volunteering.

Testimonials are largely uninspiring due to vague-ness and lack of clear benefit for recipients of voluntary work.

There was a large degree of consistency in the themes of images chosen by participants in the focus groups. They chose images portraying happy scenes, individuals enjoying themselves – volunteers and others, illustrating the difference volunteering can make to the lives of others, and giving a flavour of the choice of voluntary activities. The images chosen also portrayed a wide range of voluntary activities and almost all had at least two people in the shot, promoting the notion of teamwork and community.

In Conclusion

There is potential for the role of 'asking' non-volunteers particularly if the 'asking':

- is done by someone they know and trust
- includes mention of the time commitment and what is involved
- includes information on the benefits to the recipient and or community
- includes the opportunity for the individual to negotiate with the organisation

Materials used to 'ask' should:

- use positive images
- use images that convey choice of voluntary activities
- use messages that convey the benefits to others

- use images with at least two people in the shot
- contain an indication of the time commitment and what is involved
- contain a contact phone number and website address

Volunteer-involving organisations need to provide positive experiences for volunteers and offer voluntary opportunities that fit with the lifestyles and needs of people.

Footnote

This research was shared with a random sample of Volunteers Managers from the VDS Volunteering 100 Group who were asked to consider the implications of the findings for their practice. Their views have been written up as a guide to 'asking' entitled 'Twenty Top Tips for Asking' which is an appendix to this Research Findings Scotland publication.

References

VDS (2004) *Data on volunteering in Scotland*. VDS