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ABSTRACT. As more and more elements of the welfare state and community development in the United Kingdom have become dependent on the voluntary sector volunteer involvement has become an important issue. However, voluntary organisations believe that the recruitment situation has deteriorated and that it will become more difficult to recruit volunteers over the next five years. Building upon the findings of previous research (Bussell and Forbes 2002, 2003), this article uses a relationship marketing approach to examine recruitment and retention issues in the voluntary sector in the North East of England. A series of focus groups comprising directors of voluntary sector development agencies in the region, voluntary organisation co-ordinators and volunteers explore the key marketing issues facing the sector. The article concludes that there are a variety of relationships, which must be managed effectively to create a committed and loyal volunteer. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAUGHT. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Relationship marketing, marketing in voluntary sector, volunteers

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INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom over recent years more and more elements of the welfare state and community development have become dependent on the voluntary sector and volunteer involvement (Palmer and Hoe 1997). In order to cope with the increasing amount and range of work the number of voluntary organizations has grown quite rapidly, leading to greater competition for limited resources (financial and human) (Jackson 1999). Despite estimates that half the population of the UK volunteers time to community activities (Palmer 2000), there are signs that this may have peaked (Gaskin 1999). Organizations are depending on fewer volunteers doing more work. Existing volunteers are contributing more hours now than ever before (up from 2.7 hours a week in 1991 to 4 hours per week in 1997) (Davis Smith 1997). As the competition for volunteers becomes more acute and volunteer managers have become increasingly concerned with the recruitment and retention of volunteers marketing techniques are playing an ever more important role in this sector.

Much of the research on marketing in the voluntary sector has focused on the volunteer. Studies have concentrated on developing an understanding of volunteer motivation and a plethora of work has been undertaken to discover why people volunteer and what benefits volunteers gain from helping others (for example, Mueller 1975; Snyder and Debono 1987; Unger 1991; Nichols and Kin 1998; Wymer and Starnes 2001). There has also been much interest in identifying the socio-demographic characteristics of volunteers (Riecken, Babakus and Yavas 1994; Wymer 1998; Davis Smith 1999) as these are considered to be valuable variables in predicting the level of voluntary activity (Yavas, Riecken and Parameswaran 1981). It is suggested that an appreciation of why people volunteer and who is more likely to volunteer will enable voluntary organizations to establish meaningful segments of the volunteer “market.” This knowledge could then be used to more effectively target particular groups (Yavas and Riecken 1985) and thus result in a more efficient recruitment strategy.

This is very much based on a transactional approach to marketing, with the emphasis being on recruiting the volunteer, or “customer catching.” However, volunteering differs from other marketing exchanges in a number of ways. Perhaps most fundamentally, partners in volunteering receive benefits that are not economic in nature. These benefits are often intangible and so the relationship becomes the crucial element with the social rewards becoming most valued for the volunteer
(Arnett, German and Hunt 2003). The volunteer invests time, social commitment and also an emotional element. The relationship is also important to the organization, investing time, money and commitment to the volunteer. Rentschler et al. (2002) see this as an exchange of values for both sides. Therefore, a relationship marketing paradigm would seem to be more appropriate to the volunteer market as “relationship marketing is about healthy relationships characterized by concern, trust, commitment and service” (Buttle 1996, p. 8) and the aim of voluntary organizations is to develop a long-term relationship with their volunteers.

As Morgan and Hunt (1994) point out, to establish and maintain a good relationship commitment must be demonstrated by both parties through each putting in sufficient effort to maintain the relationship and build trust. In relationship marketing the emphasis is on developing strategies, which will achieve an enduring bond between the organization and the volunteer, moving, the potential volunteer up the ladder of loyalty to becoming an advocate for the organization. Using a relationship marketing approach the organization’s marketing objectives vary depending on which rung of the ladder is being targeted. Rentschler, Radbourne, Carr and Rickard (2002) highlight the importance of the marketing mix to engage a prospect but to maintain the relationship the organization must build on shared values, mutual knowledge and interaction. Fulfilling promises, demonstrating commitment and developing trust is needed to acquire a loyal follower.

McCort (1994) also demonstrates how many of the challenges facing not-for-profit organizations can be met through a relationship marketing approach. As such a strategy stresses mutually beneficial relationships rather than a single transaction this may overcome the unwillingness of some not-for-profit organizations to accept marketing. This relationship can become a salient attribute linking the volunteer to the organization and so build on the original motivation to volunteer. This ties the volunteer into the organization and increases volunteer loyalty. Arnett, German and Hunt (2003) suggest organizations could improve relationship-marketing success by strengthening the ties between the organization and the identities people find important. Creating social ties with the organization encourages supportive behavior as does developing the shared values between an organization and its volunteers (Wymer and Starnes 2001). Understanding what values the voluntary organization shares with its volunteers could give the organization a competitive advantage when recruiting volunteers.

Voss and Voss (1997) demonstrate that the motivation of “the customer” is important in determining the relationship. The strategies
adopted by the organization are limited by the reasons for the individual volunteering in the first place. According to McCurley and Lynch (1994) the key to retaining volunteers is to meet their personal mixture of motivational needs. Voluntary organizations should understand the heterogeneity of their volunteer base and ensure that volunteer needs are met. In the donor market larger organizations are increasingly realizing the importance of retaining existing donors (Burnett, 1992) and are using direct marketing techniques to effectively maintain fund-raisers (Tapp, 1995). As money donors can be considered complementary to time donors (Callen, 1994) a relationship marketing strategy should also be considered in volunteer marketing.

In developing a long-term relationship voluntary organizations need be aware that the needs and viewpoints of volunteers change over time. Ewing, Govekar, Govekar and Rishi (2002) discuss the relevance of the product lifecycle concept. The organization may have successfully served its volunteers in the past but this may not work in the future. Indeed research has shown that volunteers’ original motives often differ from their reasons for continuing to volunteer (Clary et al. 1998; Starnes and Wymer 1999). Starnes and Wymer (2001) describe short-term and long-term changes in which volunteers move from a “honeymoon” period to becoming more committed to the organization.

Relationship marketing is not just about relationships with customers but offers a broader view of marketing. It acknowledges that the organization is involved in relationships with a number of parties (Peck, 1996) and several models have been presented to define the nature of the relationships between these parties (Christopher, Payne and Ballantyne 1991; Millman 1993; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Doyle 1995; Gummesson 1996).

This is certainly the case for voluntary organizations. “...The typical non-profit has so many more relationships that are vitally important. ...Every non-profit organization has a multitude of constituencies and has to work out the relationship with each of them” (Drucker 1990, p. 83). A number of frameworks have been put forward to categorize the parties involved in not-for-profit organizations. Bruce (1995) sets them into four groups: beneficiaries, supporters, stakeholders and regulators. Volunteers are listed among “supporters” alongside donors, purchasers and advocates. Kotler and Andreasson (1996) have four groups of “publics”; input publics, internal publics, intermediary and consuming publics. They see volunteers as an internal public, grouped with paid staff, management and trustees.
People volunteer for specific benefits and will only continue with this activity if they are satisfied. In this way volunteers are no different from any other consumer of a service. The relationship between the volunteer and the organization is crucial. It is, therefore, valuable to consider marketing in the voluntary sector using a relationship marketing approach as that places the focus onto customer retention, orientation on product [service] benefits, high customer contact and commitment (Christopher et al. 1991), all of which are evident here. In particular the Customer Relationship Life Cycle presented by Gronroos (2000, p. 237) has been shown to be of particular relevance to an appreciation of volunteering (Bussell and Forbes 2001, 2003). The volunteer does not act in isolation but is formed, challenged and channeled by the relationships that they encounter over the life cycle of volunteering.

Volunteers change throughout their time with the organization and this has an impact on turnover rates (Starnes and Wymer 2001). Wymer and Starnes (2001) believe that strategies for recruitment and retention are complementary. For them the process begins before recruitment (“antecedents of recruitment” p. 67). The voluntary organization should determine why volunteers are needed and then design meaningful volunteer jobs. An understanding of volunteer behavior should drive recruitment and retention decisions.

This article concentrates on the relationships and relational exchanges within voluntary organizations to identify the key marketing issues facing the voluntary sector in the North East region of England. It builds on the findings of previous research (Bussell and Forbes 2001, 2003) in which the The Volunteer Life Cycle was developed and applied.

**METHODOLOGY**

Data were collected by means of focus group and key informant interviews. These techniques were adopted to allow respondents to identify and expand on what they considered to be key marketing issues and to explore and discuss aspects of volunteer management derived from a review of the literature.

A focus group interview was considered to be the most appropriate technique as 'focus groups are a valuable way of gaining insight into shared understandings and beliefs, while still allowing individual differences of opinion to be voiced' (King 1998, p. 121). A total of six group sessions were run in six different areas of the region. Group size
was kept in the range of six to nine so that participants felt neither pressured into speaking nor ignored. Participants of five of the groups included both volunteers and volunteer co-ordinators, mainly from community-based organisations and local branches of national voluntary organisations. In order to obtain the views of those operating at a more strategic level, the sixth group was made up of directors and project organisers employed in Volunteer Bureaux and Local Development Agencies (most of these were also active volunteers).

In addition key informant interviews were carried out with Volunteer Development Officers at two volunteer bureaux in the region. The marketing literature and systems used by the bureaux to recruit volunteers and liaise with voluntary organisations were presented to the interviewers and discussed at the interview.

In all, fifty-four people contributed to this research and over seventy voluntary organisations were represented.

Each of the group interviews lasted just over two hours and each key informant interview was completed in a half-day session. An interview guide derived from a review of the literature covered marketing, relationships, recruitment and retention issues, the reactivation of volunteers and volunteer management. The focus groups and interviews were taped and transcribed. After transcription, the data was analyzed using data reduction techniques (Strauss 1987). To enable comparisons to be made while preserving the uniqueness of the views and experiences of each participant a cross-case analysis was also carried out (Miles and Huberman 1994). The tapes were transcribed and analyzed by both authors to allow for inter-rater reliability. The findings presented below are applied to the Volunteer Life Cycle (Bussell and Forbes 2003).

The Volunteer Life Cycle (Bussell and Forbes 2003) consists of three stages: volunteering determinants (attracting the volunteer and), the decision to volunteer (recruitment, turning an interest and awareness into a positive action) and volunteer activity (see Figure 1). Although the volunteer is able to exit at any stage the ultimate aim is a committed volunteer who will be loyal to the organization.

**FINDINGS**

The success of the voluntary organisation in this process is dependent on the relationship established and developed between the volunteer and the organisation. In addition to this primary relationship there are many other relationships that may be as essential in the process of de-
veloping a committed volunteer. However, in deciding who is the customer, for many organisations ‘the clients come first and the volunteers often sadly come second’ and this attitude must influence the relationship between the organisation and its volunteers.

**Volunteering Determinants**

This first stage of the Volunteer Life Cycle is very much a transactional one. The voluntary organisations are operating in a competitive environment where the organisation is interested primarily in raising
awareness and the individual is at an early phase of the buying process (i.e., information search). The initial contact either made directly with a volunteer organisation or via a facilitating body such as a volunteer bureau may be described as a one off interaction or it may be seen as the first stage of the relationship. The volunteer’s attitude towards the voluntary organisation was formed by the messages received during the initial search process. Various media were utilised in establishing this relationship, from the use of local radio and television advertising for volunteers through to posters, presentations, exhibitions and word of mouth. For some organisations, ensuring media coverage was relatively easy. They were not viewed as supplicants but because they had feel good stories. For example, Riding for the Disabled provided photogenic news copy but organisations providing services to the mentally ill had more difficulty obtaining media coverage. There appeared to be little in terms of an integrated communications strategy on the part of community based and local voluntary organisations, budgetary restraints being cited as the main reason.

Those working for Volunteer Development Agencies and some volunteer co-ordinators saw part of their role as promoting the concept of volunteering. They targeted various groups to encourage them to become volunteers. One volunteer bureau had been very successful in increasing its recruitment of volunteers by 36%. This was due to an active promotion campaign by the co-ordinator. ‘I go to supermarkets, health centres. I give talks to church groups. I put up posters . . . visit leisure centres. I would say that the most successful is the leisure centre because people there have a lot of free time.’

Although the promotion of volunteering by organisations is sometimes successful the most frequently cited reason for volunteering was through word of mouth, relationships with others in the community, either a request to volunteer or ‘My friend was volunteering.’ As mentioned above, there are numerous reasons why an individual seeks to volunteer time and resources. For some the triggering factor was not an external message but an internal one.

It is important that organisations understand in marketing terms why people want (and do not want) to volunteer and segment their markets accordingly. There are some altruistic individuals who “have been there and they know exactly what the pitfalls are for other people who could be suffering the same sorts of things” and wish to support and help others. Some volunteers ‘wanted to give something back’ to the organisation with whom they, a friend or family member had had a relationship as a beneficiary. However, most volunteers are seeking some benefit
from the relationship, such as using volunteering to improve their skills or their social standing. They may ‘feel a bit isolated and naturally do want to make friends; they want to build friendships.’ Or ‘because people in this society seem to identify with what you do as a job.’

As with all marketing strategies, it is important for the organisation to identify the benefits sought and market these to the target group. However, there was little evidence of effective targeting. One organisation had carried out a leaflet drop to 4,000 houses, resulting in just one volunteer. A variety of promotional exercises were discussed but it was generally agreed, “You get a lot of promises that way but you don’t get many [volunteers].” One more enlightened co-ordinator realised “It comes back to really listening to what people really want and perhaps the organisation providing support for it.”

Although it was recognised that, “We should be encouraging all people to volunteer,” some groups were seen as particularly difficult to attract. “Because of our lifestyle is it more difficult to volunteer.” “I think there are a lot of pressures on people now which make it easy not to volunteer.” It was accepted that young people generally did not view volunteering as an attractive activity. Our participants had a mixed response to the recently introduced Millennium Volunteers scheme, designed to encourage young people to volunteer. Recruiting parents was hard as there were already a lot of demands on this group’s time. Those in full-time employment who had specific skills were also not easy to enlist. It was generally agreed, “if you are really wanted to volunteer you could volunteer on an evening or at the week-end even with a full-time job. I think if you are really committed and want to do it you’ll do it.”

**The Decision to Volunteer**

Having raised awareness of the need for volunteers it is important to move this through the next stage to matching the volunteer’s expectations to the organisation’s promise. A dialogue needs to be developed and it is here that the volunteer evaluates the organisation to establish the fit between their individual needs and the organisation’s offer. For some the decision is linked to the reason for volunteering.

*Sometimes people come in and they are very specific about the organisation they want to volunteer for. It could be that they want to volunteer maybe in a hospital because there’s been a relative who’s been very sick and the hospital helped. Or it may be another*
organisation. They may be on a course and they need some practical experience, skills in children, health or social things. . . . They come along and they have been in a job for a couple of years like the teaching profession and want to try something different and they do not want to volunteer with children.

For those who do not have a specific organisation in mind there is a plethora of voluntary organisations to choose from. Nearly all participants realized that they were in a competitive situation regarding the recruitment of volunteers. ‘There is competition, especially where you have very similar organizations. It’s going to be the one which is most appealing to that volunteer or which one that volunteer can get to.’

Some potential volunteers approach the local Volunteer Bureaux. These act as agencies in matching people to appropriate voluntary organisations. The individual is given a list of organisations and it is up to him or her to then contact the voluntary organisation. There appears to be little follow-up on what happens after the individual leaves the Bureau. The Bureaux have two marketing tasks. Firstly, marketing the concept of volunteering to potential volunteers. Secondly, to the voluntary organisations, for the Bureaux need to be aware of opportunities within the organisations to inform the potential volunteers. There were mixed views as to whose responsibility it was to provide this information. Some Development Officers felt it was up to the organisations to tell them about their opportunities, others believed they could only provide a quality service to volunteers if they were aware of all opportunities in their area and so regularly contacted the organisations and actively marketed their service. However, there was agreement that, on the whole, the voluntary organisations could do more to keep the Bureaux informed.

To provide the voluntary organisations with volunteers it was vital that the Bureaux did more than just publicize their services. They were keen to develop links with agencies and groups that could make available a supply of volunteers, such as community centers, church groups, youth clubs, local universities and schools. Monitoring the progress of potential volunteers once they left the bureau premises was problematic. Successful placements saw little need in maintaining a relationship with the bureau and dissatisfied customers did not return. “Tracking where volunteers have gone. It’s the bane of my life,” bemoaned one frustrated coordinator.

The strength of the relationship between the volunteer and agencies such as the volunteer bureau or voluntary development agency is de-
pendent upon the stage in the volunteer life cycle and the level of ‘professionalism’ in these recruitment bodies. Some volunteer bureaux felt that they were seen by organizations as magicians ‘go along to them and they will find you something.’

The organisations themselves felt that the Bureaux were useful in recruiting volunteers for some activities but could not be relied upon to fill all roles in the organisation. There was a general lack of knowledge concerning what the Bureaux were about and few voluntary organisations had an enduring or positive relationship with their local bureau.

The matching of the volunteer with the appropriate opportunities is important. Some organisations use recognised tools and processes such as application forms and interviews. Often references are sought. Surprisingly these techniques were not just limited to the larger voluntary organisations. Other organisations are more prosaic. For them ‘anyone will do,’ ‘we can’t afford to be choosy.’

There was acknowledgement that potential mismatches could take place at this stage and that full disclosure of terms and conditions was essential ‘up front.’ As one participant said ‘I sometimes think organisations are not often explicit in what they require . . . and volunteers are not offered full information. Organisations have failed them.’

The voluntary sector has also had to wake up to the fact that they face increasing competition in all aspects of their work. All participants acknowledged this but many did not necessarily see themselves in competition with other voluntary organisations. The decreasing pool of volunteers had led some to adopt the ‘you scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours approach.’ passing on volunteers who did not fit into their organisation. In one case sharing volunteers was being encouraged using the CVS as an employment bureau. However, there was little evidence elsewhere of sharing volunteers or of suggesting alternative volunteering opportunities to those who were not suited or who were looking for new challenges. Amongst those participants working at a strategic level in the sector there was recognition of the need to give volunteers a broader experience but this initiative was not supported by the voluntary organisations. “We’re trying to encourage that to happen but it’s going to be a long battle to actually get people on board with that because, culturally, it’s been about ‘This is mine and you’re not getting hold of it.’”

Having been made aware and reviewed the opportunities on offer some form of action takes place as volunteers commit themselves to a voluntary organisation. However, it is the level of commitment that was identified as having serious implications on how the relationship could
be described. For some volunteers the relationship was formed on the basis of coercion, ‘press ganged’ into volunteering to gain skills and as a pre-requisite for studying or gaining employment.

The length of time a volunteer committed can be viewed as a Relationship Continuum (see Figure 2) with some appearing for the occasional session through to those staying days or weeks to those termed professional volunteers. The lack of a regular commitment caused several organisations problems in managing their volunteers. However, one volunteer bureau, recognising the need for short term volunteering, had established a database of volunteers who could give time at short notice to complete special projects or cover illness or holidays. It was generally felt that there was “less difficulty in getting volunteers for one off events. . . . At each event we have had a couple of people who have just turned up because they’ve seen posters and said ‘Oh, I’ll help out with that.’ But they’re not interested in a commitment to a regular slot or a role. But they’ve said, ‘If you do that kind of thing again, contact me and I’ll come back.’ They’ve come to us and it’s been much easier.”

Having decided to volunteer, some individuals fail to undertake volunteer activity. It was recognised by one co-ordinator that “Sometimes it must be very difficult to take that first step into the door. It must take a hell of a lot of guts. How do you make it easier for people to come through that door? If they come through the door and get what they want they’ll come back again and there’s volunteers.”

Of prime importance to a new volunteer will be the initial experience and how the organisation presents its offer. The organisation’s aim is that the volunteer will be satisfied and will continue with the activity. At this early stage volunteers may experience post purchase dissonance. All participants agreed, it was vitally important not to lose a willing volunteer. Retaining a volunteer was seen to be closely linked to the motivation and benefits involved in volunteering but also to how the individual’s time were managed. This had to be of benefit to both parties for the relationship to develop. One participant told us ‘I sat there wanting something to do. I wasn’t given anything so I left.’ Others had more rewarding experiences. ‘I really didn’t know what I wanted to do,

![FIGURE 2. The Volunteer Relationship Continuum](image-url)
I volunteered, felt welcome, loved it . . . and now I’m a Millennium Volunteer manager.

Volunteer Activity

It is at this stage of the Volunteer Life Cycle that all group members identified a number of distinct relationships. There is the relationship the individual volunteer develops with the organisation, the relationship between volunteers and paid staff, the interaction between volunteers also the volunteer’s outside commitments.

For most organisations clear organisational objectives are set (but, in this sample, very few marketing objectives) and resources managed to meet these needs. The research highlighted the potential for conflict between the organisation’s and the volunteer’s needs. For instance one organisation sought to extend offering an advice service at weekends but this conflicted with some volunteers’ availability. There was some concern that volunteers were there to meet their own needs and not those of the organisation.

Some organisations have introduced a mentor where an existing volunteer ‘showed the ropes.’ Group bonding through a thorough induction was also cited as important in the early stages of the volunteer relationship. The importance of training as a motivator and retention tool was agreed. The more professional and astute organisations had even been awarded Investors In People (or were working towards it). Supporting volunteer development through flexible opportunities (if required) was seen as essential.

Isolation was sometimes a side effect of being a volunteer. Some voluntary activity is home based (such as stuffing envelopes). For those volunteering limited hours or unusual patterns of work getting to know people was difficult. To solve this both formal and informal methods were used to integrate the volunteer into the organisation. Training sessions and mandatory attendance on committees and working parties brought volunteers together. Social events for all were seen to be important in developing friendships and so increase commitment. One project leader complained ‘We don’t party enough’ but there were many examples of attempts to satisfy the social need of volunteers: birthday cards, Christmas dinners, coffee mornings and other social events. These were seen as a key element in maintaining team spirit and common goals. Organisers also recognised that obstacles should not be put in the way of willing volunteers. Expenses should be reimbursed. Child-care facilities provided. They were also aware that they had a responsibility to
prevent ‘cliques’ developing which excluded new volunteers or certain groups.

One co-ordinator summed up the essence of the relationship between the organisation and the volunteer. “Fundamentally, in any relationship people need three things; they need to be valued, recognised and appreciated. If people get that in a voluntary sector setting then they will stay with the organisation.”

Prior research indicated that the dynamics between that of the volunteer and the paid employee was one area that needed careful scrutiny and monitoring to prevent abuse of the volunteer. However, the findings of this research highlighted an awareness of this potential problem and methods were sought to minimise or prevent this from occurring. A good volunteer co-ordinator would seek ‘to look at how best to use the volunteer.’ In fact co-ordinators were faced with the dilemma of managing the experience of both paid and unpaid staff. It was felt that ‘going over the top’ to say thank you to a volunteer could breed unrest in paid staff. At the same time it was acknowledged that a volunteer could have a more ambivalent view of the organisation than paid staff. The volunteer could leave at short notice whereas it was believed paid staff was potentially more tied due to commitments (and the need for wages!). Occasionally a volunteer may go off sick. To fill the gap the organisation may recruit a replacement. Problems arise when “they come back and feel unwanted.”

However, sometimes volunteers were more committed than paid staff. Cases were cited, for example, where staff stopped promptly for lunch or at the end of the working day but volunteers worked on. Most felt that ‘the expectation is that you work in the same way as the paid worked’ because a client does not know the difference and expects the same level of expertise, although volunteers felt they were viewed to be of lower status within the organisation.

This psychological distance between paid staff and volunteers is sometimes exacerbated by physical distance. For example, in larger organisations most HQ staff were perceived as being paid professionals but local staff were primarily volunteers. In one organisation this physical distance was reinforced by the building being on two storeys, the top floor for paid staff and the volunteers downstairs!

Group dynamics do not disappear just because volunteers are caring people. There is also a need to manage the relationship between volunteers. There was some evidence of the “career volunteer,” people who donate time to a number of organisations, sit on several committees and consequently meet on a regular basis at different venues. New volun-
teers are not always made to feel welcome by more established members. One organisation recognised this and “have a meetings’ host, some one who is jolly and does not allow cliques to develop.”

The career volunteer may have a relationship with a number of organisations at the same time. A similar situation is true for the “serial volunteer,” who volunteers for different organisations over a period of time, corresponding to different stages in the life cycle. The profile of such an individual may be as a volunteer as a young person for a youth group, running a mother and toddler group after marriage and childbirth, helping out at Cubs and then Scouts as the child gets older and later in life working in a charity shop or delivering meals on wheels to the elderly. Such a volunteer may leave one volunteer activity to join another but is not lost to the sector.

Despite the best management of a volunteer there are instances when, as with paid employment, natural wastage takes place. People move, retire or circumstances change. ‘You volunteer to have your needs met. And when your needs are met perhaps the challenge goes out of it you go on to something else.’ Volunteers ‘have a shelf life,’ ‘all you can do is put in place an environment at work that is supporting, that is actually well run and maintained and people may stay.’ Even groups where intense and close relationships developed may end. One organiser of a support and fundraising group for those with a specific illness recognised this. “Sadly a patient would die and then the group would sometimes continue and sometimes it would trickle off. They came together in such compassion as a group and then it would end.”

Reactivating Volunteers

Some organisations saw the volunteer leaving as the end of the relationship. Others had developed strategies for continuing the relationship in the hope of reactivating the volunteer at a later stage. There appears to be an increasing role for direct marketing. Contact was maintained through sending out a regular newsletter, Christmas or birthday cards. Past volunteers were invited to social events with the current group. An activity specifically for ex-volunteers was successful in encouraging some to return to one organisation. The success of such an approach depended on the maintenance of an accurate and up-to-date database.

One organisation maintained the relationship by converting ex-volunteers into members. “When volunteers leave we don’t say, ‘Cheerio we’re never going see you again.’ We say, ‘would you like to become a
member of the organisation? You’ll get 4 newsletters a year and you’ll be able to vote at the AGM.’ They say, ‘I will if it doesn’t cost anything.’ It at least allows us to keep in touch with them.”

**DISCUSSION**

This article examines the relationships that develop through the life cycle of a volunteer. In particular, the findings have sought to explore the changes that take place in the importance of relationships as the volunteer moves from interest in volunteering to active participation and (hopefully) developing into a committed volunteer. It also highlights the key marketing issues for voluntary organisations.

In the initial process of identifying the need to volunteer (the first stage of the volunteer lifecycle) motivation is a key element in determining the strength of the relationship. For some it is purely a one-off transaction. Information may be sought about a voluntary organisation and discarded as not meeting needs. Or, for example, a group of parents want to provide a safe skateboarding area but once the goal has been achieved their activity as a volunteer ceases and relationships end. However, there is evidence that for some a longer-term relationship may be sought.

As outlined above, much work has been done to discover why people volunteer. We may like to believe that altruism is the central motive where the reward is intrinsic to the act of volunteering but the volunteer’s motive is rarely a totally selfless one (Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen 1991). Although it has been pointed out that the exchange in volunteering differs from the economic exchange at the centre of commercial marketing, there is an exchange of benefits (Marshall 1999). Benefit segmentation is a powerful technique that voluntary organisations can use to attract volunteers to their activities and differentiate them from the competition. Not only the benefits of volunteering need to be communicated to the target group but also, more importantly, the benefits offered by that specific voluntary organisation.

Mueller (1975) uses four main categories to classify the benefits gained. As well as altruism she lists the family unit consuming the collective good (for example, having a child in the unit), the volunteer enjoying a ‘selective incentive’ (for example, prestige, social contact), and the improvement of human capital. Each benefit group may have special characteristics. Research can highlight which potential volunteers are seeking particular benefits and a targeting strategy developed. Unfortunately, with resources already stretched, research was perceived by
our sample to be expensive and time consuming. Being open to public scrutiny there was also a reluctance to use hard-earned funds for marketing purposes. In order for the work of the voluntary sector to do the greatest good with the smallest amount, researchers are challenged to be resourceful and creative. However, Sue Brooker, head of BMRB Social Research, claims market research for charities is “generally very similar to other market research” (Escobales 2002).

At this initial stage the focus for most of the groups was on the role of marketing communications, as an awareness-raising tool to both potential and lapsed volunteers. Although a variety of communication tools were being used to inform and recruit volunteers, the most effective method at this stage was word of mouth. This personal appeal allows for interaction between the recruiter and the potential volunteer. It is extremely important as it reduces the perceived social risk that may deter some from volunteering (Riecken, Babakus and Yavas 1994). Furthermore, it allows the appeal to be tailored to a specific individual or the offering to be matched to the prospect’s needs. The significance of such an approach is supported by Wymer (1997) who cites a national study in the U.S.A. by Gallup that reported “People are more than four times as likely to volunteer when asked than when they are not.”

Local media and publicity were a frequently used source of non-personal communication by our participants. The main benefit to the voluntary organisation is that this is free, unlike advertising and brochures. Although using paid media allows control over the message and format few of our participants had sufficient budgets for this, relying on the low cost option of publicity. This worked well for the more photogenic organisations but left the majority relying on non-professionally produced literature.

Just because an organisation is using a low cost communication tool does not mean that the recruitment message should be any less appealing. Different messages can be used depending on the response required by the organisation (Kotler and Andreasson 1996). A rational approach may be used to provide information but an emotional message is more likely to motivate a potential volunteer. A moral note is required to gain support. The message must go beyond making the potential volunteer aware that there is a need to help to demonstrating the intensity and urgency of that need. There has to be recognition of a personal responsibility to help. It is up to the organisation to show how the potential volunteer is able to contribute.

The findings indicate that during the decision to volunteer and activity stages of the lifecycle a number of relationships may develop, as indicated in Figure 3. The level of importance of these relationships to a
The volunteer is dependent on several factors. These include the length of time the volunteer participates, the contact with the voluntary organisation, the role of the volunteer within the organisation, the support given by the organisation and the level of commitment felt by the volunteer. Some relationships (such as that between the volunteer and the organisation) are of primary importance if the activity is to continue. Other relationships are significant but are drawn upon only at specific times during the volunteer life cycle. For example, the volunteer may build up a relationship with the volunteer bureau during the search for a suitable placement but, once placed, may no longer value the relationship. Finally, the volunteer may develop a relationship with other groups that may not be directly linked to the volunteer experience.

The volunteering relationship begins between the volunteer and the volunteer bureau or with whoever is the entry point to the voluntary organisation. This could be just a brief relationship if the volunteer decides not to proceed. The decision to volunteer is also affected by other relationships the individual may have outside the volunteering relationship, such as work, family and other social commitments.

Successful recruitment may depend on the relationships that the voluntary organisation itself has established (for example, with the volunteer bureau and with other agencies such as the media and local universities.
and schools). In a more competitive environment the alliances with other voluntary organisations may become increasingly important. The organisation’s and bureaux’s promotional activity can be supported by local and central government initiatives. Again this depends on the relationship the organisation has developed with these agencies and other sources of funding.

In the relationship between the voluntary organisation and its volunteers, marketing objectives shift at this stage away from a transactional approach to a relationship-marketing framework. For volunteering to occur the organisation must keep to its promise and volunteer expectations should be met. When marketing an intangible product the key areas to be considered go beyond the traditional Four Ps (Booms and Bitner 1981). Creating the right organisational climate to encourage volunteering is crucial. The processes employed to ensure the organisation responds in a professional and understanding manner to initial enquiries, such as telephone skills, response times, follow up calls to progress enquiries within a certain time scale. A key area identified was the generic customer care skills of all staff, paid and voluntary, in dealing with enquiries from interested volunteers. In particular it is important that the concepts of internal marketing (Berry 1980) and the part-time marketer (Gummesson 1991) are clearly articulated throughout the organisation to ensure the volunteer, as a customer, receives a cohesive message about the organisation at all points of contact.

The physical aspects were seen to be a factor that may affect the decision to volunteer for the potential volunteer visiting the organisation’s site. To what extent does it meet expectations? Lottery grants have enabled premises to be rebuilt or refurbished where all issues of the Servicescape (Bitner 1990) could be optimally controlled. For those with limited funds the focus should be on the front of house elements, such as the reception area.

Some screening was carried out by participants but mainly to meet statutory obligations. No one wanted to turn away a willing volunteer but it was accepted that determining necessary volunteer jobs and developing appropriate volunteer roles to match recruits’ requirements, experience and age resulted in volunteers feeling wanted and helped to meet the needs of many of the participants who volunteered. This will also benefit the organisation as previously neglected tasks were now being completed. There is also evidence to indicate that matching programmes reduce turnover (Starnes and Wymer 2001).

It has been pointed out above that relationships change throughout the cycle. Starnes and Wymer (2001) describe how the longer people
volunteer the more committed they become to the organisation, its
cause and its staff. The objective of the marketing strategy at this stage
is to tie in the volunteer, to move from relationship to loyalty marketing
(Rentschler et al. 2002). While many volunteers may already be sup-
porters or advocates for the organisation, for the marketer managing the
volunteer experience becomes a challenge, moving the volunteer up the
loyalty ladder.

For the voluntary sector time is of a premium, volunteers in general
commit to limited and clearly defined periods of time. This leaves the
volunteer co-ordinator or equivalent with significant management chal-
enges. The evidence from the research indicates that to develop the re-
relationship through to a committed volunteer all aspects of a volunteer’s
participation needs to be managed. For one of the participating organi-
sations IIP [Investors in People] had been the mechanism used to dis-
play to both volunteers and paid staff the organisation’s commitment to
them as fully contributing members.

Retention strategies used by the groups were many and in the main
dependent on the benefits gained from volunteering. Being nominated
as employee of the month appealed to public recognition, ego and
self-esteem needs. For the more altruistic recognition through a simple
thank-you and awareness of their contribution was sufficient. Younger
volunteers were more responsive to direct acknowledgement of their
contribution through awards linked to skill development but the mature
volunteer sought more social ‘rewards.’

People continue volunteering as long as the experience continues to be a
positive one (Starnes and Wymer 2001) but not everyone goes on to be-
come a committed volunteer. Our research showed that volunteers do dis-
continue serving. This may be due to factors beyond the organisation’s
control and often a volunteer may leave an organisation but is not necessar-
ily lost to the sector. The Volunteer Life Cycle has a point at which volun-
teers can re-enter and the process begins once again. However, losing
experienced volunteers is costly for the organisation and this emphasises
the importance of effective recruitment and retention strategies.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The findings of this research have clearly indicated that voluntary or-
 ganisations have definitely recognised the necessity to view their volun-
teers as well as beneficiaries as customers. For several of the participating
organisations a wake-up call had resulted in seeing fellow voluntary or-
ganisations as competitors and as such a need to position and diversify themselves with something unique and of value to the volunteer. However, this may not be sufficient if the organisation wishes to retain its volunteers. Today’s volunteer is an active participant in the exchange process. Managing the relationships becomes as important as recruiting volunteers.

Those voluntary organisations based in the community must focus on why individuals volunteer, what benefits they are seeking. Research does not have to be costly. Questioning existing volunteers, conducting an ongoing research project asking new volunteers and those making enquiries about volunteering opportunities and systematic analysis of the data already held could produce much useful information. From this the organisation can identify segments to target.

An understanding of the benefits the organisation offers volunteers is another vital starting point to the marketing effort. These can then be communicated in the most effective manner to the target market using personal appeals, word of mouth, publicity, local media and other methods known to be successful in attracting the target group. The media used must capture the attention of potential volunteers and the message should stress that organisation’s unique selling point in order to differentiate it from the competition.

Matching the needs of the volunteer with the benefits offered by the organisation is a vital first stage in the relationship. Good human resource management practice is as essential for volunteers as for paid staff. Job specifications (derived from the organisation’s needs) should be drawn up and matched against individuals’ requirements, skills and experience. A structured induction should be made available for every new volunteer and regular personal development reviews for the more established. Retention strategies such as those highlighted by the group participants above should be developed. Volunteer managers have to understand the relationships central to the volunteer experience and how these may change over time. This includes maintaining contact with ex-volunteers to allow for reactivation and to ensure that they are not lost to the sector.

Finally, although a wide variety of organisations were represented in this study, it is accepted that the relationships identified should be examined using a larger sample. It is the intention of the researchers to conduct a larger survey of organisations, volunteers and ex-volunteers, which, it is hoped, will confirm the findings from these initial group discussions and literature review.
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