“Potential” Environmental Volunteers: A Market for Growth

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Public awareness of, and concern for, the global environmental crisis has been growing exponentially in recent years. However, this burgeoning environmental consciousness has, in many cases, failed to materialise into formal policy on the agendas of many governments around the world. In the midst of government inaction, responsibility for providing important environmental restoration and support services has fallen on the third sector and a multitude of environmental organisations has emerged. This has contributed to increased levels of competition for the limited financial and human resources available to non-profit organisations.

Similar to other volunteering organisations, environmental causes face the challenge of convincing the market of potential volunteers that their cause is more worthy, more interesting, and more deserving of their time than the others. To this point, however, very little work has been done on examining those individuals who are most likely to volunteer for environmental causes, leaving practitioners with without information on which to base marketing decisions. The few studies which have been conducted usually focus on those people who are already volunteer for environmental causes (for example Dolnicar & Randle, 2006) instead of those who might potentially get involved, and they are limited in the profiling information provided.

This study expands knowledge in this area by (1) focusing on individuals who say they are likely to volunteer for an environmental cause in future (i.e. "potential" environmental volunteers); (2) understanding if they are driven purely by the mission, that is, a particularly pro-environmental attitude, or by a multi-dimensional range of altruistic and egoistic motivations, and if these differ from non-environmental volunteers; and (3) comparing the values of this group of potential environmental volunteers with those who would not consider volunteering for an environmental cause, to provide more robust profile of this segment.

Data was collected through an online panel. Invitations to participate in the study were sent to a national Australian sample and the questionnaire was available for completion online for approximately four weeks. Respondents answered questions relating to their past and intended volunteering behaviour, environmental attitudes, reasons for involvement and personal values.

Respondents were given a list of 11 different volunteering causes and asked to indicate which causes they would consider volunteering for. 399 participants indicated that they were likely to volunteer for an environmental organisation in future but had not volunteered for an environmental cause in the past 12 months – these individuals formed the group of “potential environmental volunteers”. 981 participants did not check the “environmental” box when asked which types of organisations they were likely to volunteer for, and thus formed the segment of “non-environmental volunteers”. The total sample size for this study was 1,380.

Environmental attitudes were measured using the New Environmental Paradigm (Dunlap, Van Liere, Mertig & Jones, 2000) and an average score out of five was calculated for the two groups. Results indicate that the potential environmental volunteers had stronger pro-environmental attitudes than the non-environmental volunteers group. The mean score for potential environmental volunteers was 3.8 while the mean score for non-environmental volunteers was 3.5, a difference that was significant at the 95% level (F=61.0, df=1).

In relation to motivations, respondents were presented with a list of 19 possible reasons for volunteering and asked to tick as many of the reasons for volunteering as applied to them. Individuals who had not volunteered in the past 12 months were asked to tick the reasons that would be important in their decision to volunteer. Chi-square tests indicated that the potential environmental volunteers were significantly more likely to nominate 11 of the 19 motivations than the non-environmental volunteers. These included a range of altruistic motivations, for
example to support and important cause, and egoistic reasons, for example to socialise with people who are similar.

To measure values, participants were presented with a list of 20 values from Schwartz's values survey (Schwartz, 1992) and asked to indicate on a scale from 0-7 how important each value was in their life. ANOVA indicated significant differences between the groups for eight of the 20 values included. Potential environmental volunteers rated only one value significantly lower than non-environmental volunteers; this was authority (F=5.90, df=1). For seven other values, however, potential environmental volunteers rated them as more important than non-environmental volunteers. These were a varied life, freedom, helpfulness, an exciting life, creativity, equality, and, perhaps not surprisingly, environmental protection.

Results have important practical implications for environmental volunteer recruitment managers. Those individuals who would consider volunteering for an environmental cause, or “potential” environmental volunteers, have a number of distinct characteristics when compared to the non-environmental volunteers group. They have stronger pro-environmental attitudes, they are motivated by a range of altruistic and egoistic factors, and they are characterised by distinct personal values. Any communications and recruitment strategies by environmental organisations trying to attract volunteers should clearly communicate the environmental mission of the organisation. However, the fact that they are motivated by such a wide range of other factors means that packaging the benefits of involvement as a multi-faceted experience, would be even more enticing for this segment of the market.

This study makes a unique contribution to the growing body of literature in the area of volunteering because it focuses not only on those volunteers who are already involved in specific volunteering activities, but those individuals who are likely to become involved in future. This segment of the market represents an enormous opportunity for environmental organisations to broaden the pool from which they recruit volunteers, and to attract new people who have not previously been involved. This is an important issue for many environmental organisations because the competition for volunteers is growing and without the tools to recruit and attract sufficient numbers many would cease to exist.

References

