

Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.

Some national and regional associations, as well as their local chapters, do not seem to have any difficulty in finding an adequate number of volunteers to carry out their mission, while other associations struggle to bring in new volunteers and they have to rely on the same people time and again. Without a regular infusion of new volunteers, the association runs the risk of “burning out” the volunteers that it does have, scaring away potential volunteers who do not want to get stuck in a seemingly never ending assignment, and running the risk of appearing cliquish.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I would have volunteered if someone would have asked me.” The problem becomes, whom do you ask?

Two recent studies by Association Metrics examined the differences between volunteers and non-volunteers to determine what differences exist between these two groups and how this information could be used to determine which members are more inclined to volunteer. Non-volunteers were also asked what it would take for them to volunteer.

One of the associations studied, (Association A), has 56,000 members who are healthcare professionals, and the other association, (Association B), has 25,000 members who are financial services professionals. Both associations have local chapters.

The comprehensive research studies were conducted primarily for strategic planning purposes - to learn how these associations could increase retention and non-dues revenue - with volunteerism being one component of the study.

The study tested the hypothesis that individuals who volunteered had different motivations for joining the association than those members who did not volunteer. Members in Association A were presented with fourteen (14) possible reasons for joining the association, and were asked to indicate which of those reasons were instrumental in their joining, and to assign a weight to indicate the personal importance of each reason they selected. Members in Association B selected their reasons for joining from a list of ten (10) possible reasons, and also provided an importance weight.

Each of the reasons for joining was placed into one of three categories, (1) altruism, (2) personal gain, and (3) neither altruism nor personal gain. Examples of altruistic reasons for joining their association included: supporting their profession, supporting the mission of the association, getting involved with the association, and giving back to the community.

Examples of personal gain reasons for joining included: member benefits, member discounts on meetings and continuing education, and to keep abreast of issues in their profession.

Reasons that were neither altruistic nor personal gain in nature included being obligated to join, and because their dues were reimbursed by their employer.

Respondents were placed into categories on the basis of whether they had ever served as a national or local volunteer, or had never served as a volunteer for their association.

The table below shows the composition of why volunteers and non-volunteers joined their respective association. The percentages indicate the importance that altruism and personal gain played in their decision to join the association. For example, respondents in Association A who are current or former national volunteers, indicated that 25% of their reasons for joining the association were altruistic in nature, compared to non-volunteers whose altruistic reasons for joining made up only 15% of the reasons they joined.

| | | National Volunteers | Local Volunteers | Non-volunteers |
|---------------|---------------|---------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Association A | Altruism | 25% | 20% | 15% |
| | Personal Gain | 63% | 68% | 72% |
| | Neither | 12% | 12% | 13% |
| Association B | Altruism | 42% | 45% | 30% |
| | Personal Gain | 55% | 52% | 64% |
| | Neither | 3% | 3% | 6% |

Two key takeaways from the table above are: (1) current and former volunteers seek to satisfy more altruistic needs from their association membership than do non-volunteers, and (2) the absolute percentage of altruistic reasons for joining will vary by the profession the association serves, its mission, the array of benefits offered, and whether the association satisfies a requirement for the profession (e.g. certification).

As shown in the preceding table, non-volunteers in Association B have a higher percentage of altruistic reasons for joining (30%) than do Association A's national volunteers (25%) and local volunteers (20%). Therefore, examining the relative difference between volunteers and non-volunteers within an association is more insightful than is comparing the absolute percentages between associations.

By understanding why members join their association, management can develop a ranking of its members on their likelihood to volunteer, based on their desire to fulfill altruistic needs. For current members, this can be accomplished by including a single question in any member survey that captures members' reasons for joining. For incoming members, the reasons for their joining might be gathered from a question included on the membership application, or may be sent to the new member in a follow-up email immediately after joining.

In addition to examining WHICH members might be more likely to volunteer, research also explored WHAT it would take to get a non-volunteer to serve as a volunteer.

In the study, members who had never served as a volunteer for their association were also asked what it would take for them to volunteer. Ninety-two percent (92%) of the 1,600 non-volunteer respondents said that they would consider volunteering if certain conditions were met. (The remaining 8% of non-volunteer respondents indicated that they would not volunteer under any conditions.) The top five conditions (in order of the frequency of mentions) are listed below. Most respondents provided multiple comments, therefore the percentages below sum to more than 100%.

Interesting Assignments

The number one criterion for volunteering, mentioned by 63% of non-volunteer respondents, is that they would consider volunteering if there were assignments or projects available that were interesting to them.

Time

Fifty-six percent (56%) of those who had previously not volunteered said they would consider volunteering if they had the time.

Understanding What Is Needed

Having someone affiliated with the association explain to them what the association needs from its volunteers was mentioned by 42% of respondents.

Limited Basis

Thirty-nine percent (39%) of the non-volunteers feared that the project would be too involved. If they could find a volunteer position in which their services could be used on a limited basis, they would be willing to volunteer.

Being Asked

Nearly one-third (31%) of the non-volunteer respondents said that they would consider volunteering if they were asked.

Based on these results, it appears that an association can maximize its efficiency in recruiting volunteers by contacting members whose reasons for joining the association have a higher percentage of altruism, and offering them projects and assignments that are interesting and have a time commitment that fits into their schedule.

About the Author

Larry J. Seibert is the President/CEO of Association Metrics. He has a Ph.D. from Purdue University in Retail Management and an MSBA from Indiana University Northwest with a concentration in Marketing. Dr. Seibert is a member of the American Society of Association Executives, the Indiana Society of Association Executives, and the Association Forum of Chicagoland. He can be reached at larry@associationmetrics.com or by phone at 317-840-2303.