

The role of brand and social context in the choice of charitable organisation by volunteers

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Abstract

Last year, 29% of people in the UK volunteered at least once a month through an organisation or group. At some point, they all made the personal decision who to support with their time. However, despite its importance in the future sustainability of charities to deliver welfare, this phenomenon has not been closely examined from an academic perspective. This working paper brings together decision making theory with brand theory for charity volunteering for the first time. Through the combination of explicit and implicit influences, the brand enables the potential volunteer to differentiate between organisations. The brand drives preference but in a way that is not salient to the volunteer, hence the underreporting of brand in the decision making process even for strong non-profit brands. The purpose of the paper is idea development – to conceptualise the phenomenon from the perspective of the individual through their personal and social context.

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1. Introduction

The ability to attract and retain volunteers is a primary driver in the effectiveness and sustainability of the voluntary sector in the UK (Rochester 2009). It is already a significant force; each year over 20 million people across the UK volunteer, donating more than 100 million hours to their communities every week (Government 2013).

The need for charities to support the most vulnerable in our society has rarely been more pressing. The economic recession and subsequent contraction of government budgets through the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) has had a major impact on direct welfare benefits received (Taylor-Gooby 2012). The provision of these services by non-profit organisations is dependent on attracting volunteers (p217 Andreasen and Kotler 2002).

Despite a vast body of work interrogating why people volunteer, there is little academic insight into the choice of charity to volunteer for (Wilson 2000, Venable, Rose et al. 2005). Given the size of the sector within the UK economy, prevalence amongst the UK population and the pressing need to support the most vulnerable in our society, this feels like an oversight. In effect the decision to volunteer is one of individual consumer behaviour. The question is whether, when the personal goals, social context and brand attributes are considered, patterns start to emerge. Understanding any common ground in the decision

making process that a volunteer experiences would be of substantial benefit to charities needing to attract volunteers.

1.1 Scope

Although considering academic insight globally, this paper focuses on the UK charitable sector with a particular emphasis on service provision volunteering as opposed to fundraising or campaigning volunteering. It also focuses on formal volunteering as it involves a greater personal commitment and therefore hypothetically a higher involvement decision process. Finally, it focuses on charities within the top one hundred brands as defined by the 2013 Charity Brand Index (Harris-Interactive 2013).

1.2 Definitions of volunteering

Volunteering is classified into formal and informal volunteering (Government 2013). Formal volunteering is of greater interest for this research and is defined as “Giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations to benefit other people or the environment (for example, the protection of wildlife or the improvement of public open spaces)” (p26 Government 2010).

The third party component brings an external, interesting complexity to the decision to volunteer – understanding the role that the brand plays, the values the organisation embodies, and the benefits the volunteer receives from the more formal role. The sense of commitment to the third party is also important as it implies a more considered decision prior to “signing up” than if it only concerned participation in a one- off event for example. This is reinforced by the finding that regular volunteers have been found to have a broader range of motivations than episodic, occasional volunteers (Hutin 2008).

2: Academic Insight

The research question is informed by three clusters of theory – volunteer motivation and exchange, decision making and symbolic brand consumption

2.1 Volunteering motivation and exchange

There has been a clear and robust articulation of the breadth of functional goals people are seeking to meet through volunteering – including social, career and learning (Clary, Ridge et al. 1998, Bénabou and Tirole 2003, Mowen and Sujun 2005, Shye 2010). This assumes people act in their own self-interest, in this context contributing time and rationally expecting something in return. The prospective benefits of achieving those personally

important goals are weighed against costs of volunteering. This concept of volunteering as an exchange is underpinned by Social Exchange Theory (Blau 1964, Emerson 1976), explained by Blau as the “voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the rewards they are expected to bring” (p91, 1964). Social Exchange Theory assumes people act in their own self-interests rather than in the interests of others. This perspective is in contrast to the research on altruism, defined as a “general disposition to selflessly seek to help others” (Mowen and Sujan 2005), particularly in the cases of blood or organ donation and bystander heroism (Piliavin, Rodin et al. 1969, Titmuss 1971, Piliavin and Hong-Wen 1990). However Wilson argues altruism underestimates the role of self-identity – for example someone who thinks of themselves as the type of person who helps others even if they are not recognised for it (Wilson and Musick 1997).

Andreasen and Kotler (2002) expanded the pure exchange model for non-profit organisations taking into account the wider environment. Their “BCOS” model outlines the trade-offs between **B**enefits, **C**osts, role of **O**thers and **S**elf-efficacy on the non-profit customer – whether donor or volunteer. As with Exchange Theory, the customer incurs some costs and in return receives benefits. It recognises that time is not the only cost involved; others include opportunity cost of not participating in other activities, potential stigma by association with socially difficult causes (Omoto and Snyder 1995), plus emotional cost of supporting someone potentially vulnerable. Likewise meeting functional goals such as building friendships and skills are not the only benefits (Andreasen, Goodstein et al. 2005). The BCOS model describes how behaviour is also influenced by the social pressure of others and also whether the individual believes they can succeed – whether that is the first step of being successful in winning the volunteering role, or the longer term success of making a real difference (Andreasen and Kotler 2002). Blau goes further and believes the action is contingent on the rewarding nature of other people’s reaction. He implies if there was no reaction by others, the action would not have taken place (1964).

Venable and Rose (2005) evoke Social Exchange Theory as particularly relevant for non-profit brands. Given the very intangibility of the organisation they argue that stakeholders, like donors, consider the rewards of action at an abstract level – including personal satisfaction, social approval or humanitarianism. The authors argue that although there may be social benefits from buying commercial brands, such as status and security, they are more salient amongst non-profit brands. Therefore one implication of this theoretical construct for volunteering research is a need to understand the role of the reaction by family, friends and peers to the volunteering decision.

So the social exchange construct involves an evaluation of perceived costs and benefits of volunteer – whether that is volunteering generally, the cause, the specific charity or the volunteering role. It implies a conscious decision and an evaluation of alternatives, whether they are other charities or other uses of time. As the cost benefit exchange is salient and

explicit, it can be recalled by volunteers which might explain its prominence in national volunteering surveys (Government 2013) and academic studies.

2.2 Volunteer Decision Making

However recent insights into decision making theory emphasise that explicit factors tell only a small part of the story; they stress the importance of implicit brand knowledge, gathered over time and stored in our subconscious memory. This passive accumulation of brand knowledge builds from a range of sensory signals – visiting a high street charity shop, seeing people collecting, reading about someone supported, hearing about local impact (Berry 2000, Hankinson 2001, Lindstrom 2010). It is described by Kahneman as System 1 thinking (2011); how our autopilot absorbs and evaluates everything we see and hear and matches it to our needs. Signals that are relevant to us are given more attention. These experiences of the brand, when encountered regularly, create linkages in the brain, associations that build active perceptions of the charity brand. Where there is a good fit to what a person needs, we assign a higher value to the signal and give it our attention, we focus on it. Through this associated memory, the volunteer builds a picture of the expected value delivered by the brand and so reduces the effort of processing information about the brand, the behavioural cost.

The value of the brand to the volunteer is also dependant on how the brand has been “framed”, what it has been contrasted with – other brands in the same cause, other brands making an impact locally, other uses of time for example. Where those signals are then endorsed by explicit, conscious knowledge (System 2) they are then turned into beliefs about the brand and subsequent actions.

Kahneman highlights the work of Robert Zajonc (1968) on “mere exposure effect” as particularly relevant. The more regularly your subconscious is exposed to a particular brand, the more familiar it becomes and the more it is viewed with cognitive ease. It is seen subconsciously as a safe choice. Interestingly this resonates with the research of McQuail (2010), into the relationship between high visibility of brand communication and positive reputation.

From the perspective of the brand, emotion also plays a significant role, supported recently through work by Michel and Rieunier (2012). Building on Bennet and Gabriel’s research (2003), they created a new scale for brand image based on five non profit organisations and robustly, quantitatively tested it. The four dimensions of brand image developed were usefulness, efficiency, affect, dynamism. In particular the “affect” dimension was significant in explaining intention to give time – detailed as friendly, generous, warm, engaging. Emotional dimensions exerted a stronger influence than functional dimensions. Interestingly they found several of the non profit organisations they examined scored low

on “affect” and concluded they had devoted less effort to building an emotional link with stakeholders than for example building confidence in performance. As one of the few studies to examine charitable giving of both time and money, they conclude: “that charities have to understand how to create emotions linked to their brand especially when trying to attract more volunteers” (p706 Michel and Rieunier 2012).

2.3 Symbolic brand consumption

Taking a step back, it is important not only to consider the brand construct but also understand brand consumption in the not for profit sector. Pure definitions of consumption describe a person buying, using and disposing of a specific and tangible product. However more recently this definition has been broadened to include a person’s choices about how they consume time, how they make use of “services, activities, experiences and ideas such as going to the dentist, attending a concert, taking a trip and donating to UNICEF” (p3 Hoyer and MacInnis 2004). As the American sociologist John Wilson had earlier argued “Volunteer work involves both the production of a good or service and the consumption of a symbolic good.”(p696 Wilson and Musick 1997). Bagozzi argues marketing exchanges can be indirect and involve intangible and symbolic factors such as social or psychological benefits (1975). He builds on the work of Levy in his 1959 “Symbols for sale” article who argued “people buy things for what they mean, not just for what they do”, reprinted (Levy 1999).

So from the volunteer perspective, the meaning of the different charity brands they have been exposed to over time is personal and unique, influenced by their experience and interaction with the brands. In this context brand is a social construct. This consumer centred perspective believes the perception of brand that exists in the consumer’s mind is reality, it is how they as an individual perceive and experience the brand.

The brand is an enabler to consumer choice, a “central driver of consumer buying behaviour” (Biel 1993) and acts as a shorthand way of describing a bundle of functional and emotional attributes. The role of the brand for non-profit organisations is to enable stakeholders “to make genuine choices between charity organisations dedicated to similar causes” (p41 Hankinson 2001).

“if the brand fails to develop or maintain differentiation, consumers have no basis for choosing it over others” (p83 Aaker 2003)

One implication of strong differentiation is reducing information costs for the volunteer. When a volunteer is automatically attracted to a charity brand, evoking Kahneman’s autopilot system 1 thinking (Kahneman 2011); the volunteer does not have to research a list of alternative potential volunteering opportunities which takes longer, Kahneman’s slow system 2 thinking. Likewise a charity brand that reduces the risk of the choice for the

volunteer, conveys confidence that their time will be used effectively and to make a difference for example.

The work of Hoyer and MacInnis in deconstructing the symbolic consumption concept is particularly relevant to understanding the meaning stakeholders give to non-profit brands (2004). They describe the four functions of symbolic consumption as emblematic, role acquisition, connectedness and expressiveness. In the context of volunteering, the emblematic function symbolises our membership of different social groups, revealing something about the values and beliefs of the person. For example volunteering for a political or environmental charity symbolises something quite different to volunteering at the Royal Opera House. Either consciously or subconsciously the choice of which organisation to volunteer for reveals the groups we do belong to or wish to belong to (Wymer Jr and Samu 2002). The role acquisition function is where volunteering gives people a role in their lives, for example meeting unmet needs post retirement or redundancy (Wymer Jr 1999) or enabling people to take on a more religious role in their community (Wymer Jr 1997). As the roles we have during our lives constantly change (Hoyer and MacInnis 2004), the challenge for charities is to attract volunteers at the moment when they are looking for a new role, the point of serendipity when the needs of both the volunteer and the charity can be mutually met. The connectedness function links the volunteer to specific events or people within their lives, for example volunteering for a charity that has supported a family member in a hospice (Starnes and Wymer 2000) or through a serious illness. Finally the expressive function enables the volunteer to say something about him or herself through the choice of which organisation to volunteer for – their values and/or personality (Hoyer and MacInnis 2004). This particularly resonates for non-profit organisations which have been described as value expressive organizations (Supphellen, Kvitastein et al. 1997), where the values lie at the heart of the organisation (Saxton 1995).

3. Relating theory to practice

There is a wide variation amongst charity brands in the application of professional brand marketing; with the larger, donation led organisations usually although not exclusively at one end of the spectrum (Chew and Osborne 2009). In the middle are other non-profits applying day to day branding (Stride and Lee 2007, McGrath 2010, Tapp 2011) but often under different terminology. Finally at the other end of the marketing spectrum are smaller and/or traditionally statutory funded charities, whose priority is front line service provision, tend to operate with minimal central support functions such as marketing. Overall, Hibbert (2003) observed charities often experience low brand awareness and lack clearly defined positions which makes it harder for people to differentiate them from other non-profits .

However as Kotler and Andreason (1996) argue in their widely cited and practical guide book for non-profit marketing, “the bottom line of all marketing strategy and tactics is to influence behaviour” and one of the behavioural objectives they list for non-profits is “inducing people to donate time or money”.

Even if charities themselves lack a culture of branding, it does not follow that they lack a brand. As Berry (2000) observed, within services it is the company, not the product, that is the primary brand. Based on his research amongst 14 mature service companies, he argued that strong brands increased the customer’s trust of the invisible purchase. As there are no products, with their inherent physical differences, developing the brand is crucial to building differentiation. The different components of the service brand Berry describes all offer opportunities for service companies to build the relationship with customers. Specifically for non-profit organisations that is with donors, volunteers or service users. The “presented brand” is in a large part controlled by the (service) company and includes brand touch points like advertising, retail outlets, job advertisements or volunteer work wear. In contrast, they have less control over the brand information given through external communication through word of mouth or keyboard, national or local public relations. Finally brand meaning is the customer’s dominant perception of the brand, as previously discussed. Although both external communication and the presented brand contribute to brand meaning, the primary influence is the service experience (Berry 2000). In the context of non-profit organisation, this experience could include being a personal recipient of the charitable service or having a family member as a service user or other interactions with the charity through retail outlets, fundraising events or outreach programmes for example into local groups.

A powerful driver stimulating the development of charity brands is competition. Reaching and attracting priority stakeholder groups such as regular donors (Saxton 2011), volunteers, corporate social responsibility partners and opinion formers enables survival for some charities as statutory funding dries up. Looking at the UK non-profit sector Hankinson (2001) proved that significantly more voluntary income was raised by highly brand-orientated fundraisers than was by low brand-orientated fundraisers. The brand is seen as the organisation and is short hand way of enabling donors to differentiate as causes become cluttered. For charities that do invest in building awareness, there is empirical evidence of a positive benefit to reputation. Where organisations are well known they tend to have a better reputation. There is also evidence of a virtual circle with publicity - mass media giving more coverage to organisations they believe are favoured by the public. Which in turn leads the public to believe these organisations are more important due to the fact they receive more media attention, known as mass communication theory (McQuail 2010).

4. Conclusion and next steps

This working paper examines the phenomenon of choice of charity by regular volunteers. It conceptualises the phenomenon in a new way that combines brand theory with decision making theory through an individual volunteer lens. A recent study of volunteering in the UK highlighted that participation was personal and needed to be viewed from the perspective of the individual taking part (Brodie, Hughes et al. 2011), within their social context. The majority of our decisions are made on autopilot (Kahneman 2011) – which is rarely discovered through studies of volunteer decision making. The prospective volunteer learns about the brand over time through a range of signals and senses. Through the combination of the explicit considered influences and implicit autopilot influences, the brand enables the potential volunteer to differentiate between organisations (Haidt 2001, Hankinson 2001, Venable, Rose et al. 2005, Kahneman 2011). The brand drives preference (Biel 1993, Kressmann, Sirgy et al. 2006) but in a way that is not top of mind for volunteers hence the underreporting of the role of brand in the decision making process, even for strong non-profit brands. Academic insight into symbolic brand consumption, volunteer motivation and decision making all inform this area. However the phenomenon of charitable brand choice by prospective volunteers remains largely unexplored and yet the potential practical impact for the voluntary sector is significant, given the importance of cost effective recruitment of new volunteers to the sustainability of welfare delivery charities.

The next stage in the research is the analysis of the research data gathered through 50 depth interviews with volunteers from five leading UK charities. The volunteers were all regular, service delivery volunteers who had joined the organisations in the last 12 months. Using means-end chain methodology the interviews explored both explicit and implicit reasons behind their choice of charity including the role of brand and the personal and social context for their decision.

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