

The Volunteer Life Cycle: A Key to 4-H Volunteer Involvement¹

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Overview

A key responsibility for Extension 4-H agents is to engage volunteers and expand their involvement in 4-H programs (Wessel & Wessel, 1982). This EDIS publication is designed to help Extension faculty understand volunteer behavior by providing an overview of the Volunteer Life Cycle model (Bussell & Forbes, 2003), defining the four stages of volunteer behavior, and explaining how to apply these concepts to 4-H. The 4-H agents may find this publication helpful when engaging and involving volunteers in Extension programs.

What is the Volunteer Life Cycle?

The Volunteer Life Cycle (VLC) model was developed in 2003 by Helen Bussell and Deborah Forbes (see Figure 1). The VLC model was developed by using the principles of relationship marketing related to consumer behavior to identify the four stages of volunteer behavior. The VLC starts with the determinants associated with volunteering, continues with the decision to volunteer, moves on to the volunteer activity itself, and then ends with either a committed volunteer or the end of a volunteer's service. The model is described below.

Consumer Behavior vs. Volunteer Behavior

Consumer behavior is often represented by the Customer Relationship Life Cycle model (Gronroos, 2000). Each stage in the model provides a different marketing challenge focused toward consumers. In the initial stage, the marketing objective is to *create interest* in a product or service. During the purchasing process stage, interest is converted into *action* through the purchase of a good or service. The consumption or usage stage should invoke a *positive experience* for the consumer. Positive experiences, or *perceived service quality*, translates into resale, cross sales, and enduring customer relationships; poor experiences result in product abandonment and loss of future sales.

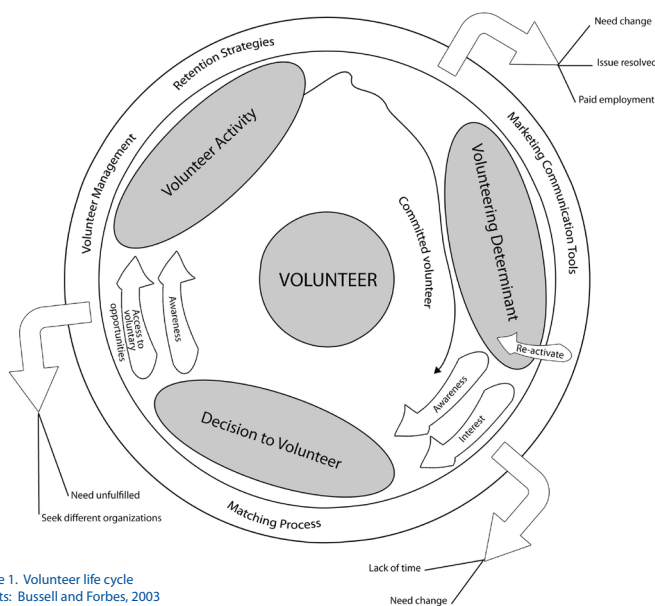


Figure 1. Volunteer life cycle
Credits: Bussell and Forbes, 2003

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The phases of a customer relationship life cycle model closely relate to volunteer behavior. The goal of both models is to develop long-term loyalty. Creating customer *interest* in a product or service is analogous with making the public aware of volunteer opportunities. Moving consumers to *action* through the purchase process is consistent with the general public making the *decision* to volunteer. A consumer's response to consumption of a product or service is similar to the response a volunteer would have from the *volunteer activity*. A high level of satisfaction from a volunteer experience is likely to result in *volunteer retention*. This is consistent with *perceived service quality* by a consumer. Likewise, a poor volunteer experience usually leads to unfulfilled needs by a volunteer, and retention is unlikely.

The Stages of Volunteer Behavior

The volunteer life cycle begins with the volunteering determinants. During this stage, the general public becomes aware of volunteer opportunities in Extension. There are two important tasks that are relevant at this stage: a needs assessment and a marketing plan.

A needs assessment is the systematic process for determining and addressing the needs or “gaps” between the current status and the desired conditions or “wants” related to volunteer involvement. A thorough needs assessment provides the basis for priority setting and helps identify new opportunities for volunteer involvement. To conduct a needs assessment for a volunteer program:

1. Gather information related to:
 - a. current volunteers and their location
 - b. current volunteer roles and role descriptions, if available
 - c. county demographics
 - d. existing expansion and review documents
2. Analyze information with the County Extension Director (CED), Regional Specialized 4-H Agent (RSA), 4-H County Association, 4-H Youth, and other key stakeholders.
3. Identify priorities for volunteer involvement.
4. Create volunteer role descriptions.

When armed with volunteer opportunities, marketing becomes important. Marketing is about making the public aware of 4-H and the available volunteer opportunities. This includes:

1. The history of 4-H and its role in youth development
2. The benefits to youth
3. The value to the community
4. The role of volunteers
5. The available volunteer opportunities
6. The benefits of volunteering

There are a number of methods to market the available 4-H volunteer opportunities:

- Print materials
- Public service television
- Newspaper articles
- Blogs
- Facebook
- YouTube
- Twitter
- Speaking engagements
- Open houses
- 4-H website and other websites
- Targeted recruitments

Keep in mind that volunteerism is often about relationships and often requires using all available communication channels.

The Decision to Volunteer

Having raised awareness of the 4-H program and the role of volunteers, it is important to move awareness through to the next stage, which is the decision to volunteer. The decision to volunteer is about motivation (McCurley & Lynch, 2006). There are many studies related to why people volunteer; however, the work of Esmond & Dunlop (2004) provides a comprehensive guide to volunteer motivation. Their development of the Volunteer Motivation Inventory (VMI) will be used to describe this aspect of the volunteer life cycle. In the VMI, ten key categories describe the motivations of volunteers, based upon research of more

than 2,400 volunteers from 15 different nonprofit organizations. These categories are:

1. *Values* – Describes the situation where a volunteer is motivated by the prospect of being able to act on firmly held belief that it is more important for one to help others.
2. *Recognition* – Describes a situation where a volunteer enjoys the recognition that volunteering gives them. They enjoy their skills and contributions being recognized, and this is what motivates them to volunteer.
3. *Social Interaction* – Describes a situation where a volunteer particularly enjoys the social atmosphere of volunteering. They enjoy the opportunity to build social networks and interact with other people.
4. *Reciprocity* – Describes a situation where a volunteer enjoys volunteering and views it as a very equal exchange. The volunteer has a strong understanding of the “higher good.”
5. *Reactivity* – Describes a situation where a volunteer is volunteering out of a need to heal or address their own past issues.
6. *Self-Esteem* – Describes a situation where a volunteer seeks to improve their own self-esteem or feelings of self-worth through their volunteering.
7. *Social* – Describes a situation where a volunteer seeks to conform to normative influences of significant others (e.g., friends or family).
8. *Career Development* – Describes a situation where a volunteer is motivated to volunteer by the prospect of gaining experience and skills in the field that may eventually be beneficial in assisting them to find employment.
9. *Understanding* – Describes a situation where a volunteer is particularly interested in improving their understanding of themselves, the people they are assisting, and/or the organization for which they are a volunteer.
10. *Protective* – Describes a situation where a volunteer is volunteering as a means of escaping negative feelings about themselves.

The implications of this research for 4-H is that volunteer programs must have episodic, short-term and long-term options for volunteering, and recruitment strategies need to

be comprehensive. For more information, refer to the EDIS factsheet *Understanding Volunteer Management in 4-H*.

The Volunteer Activity

People who are provided with an appropriate volunteer role and make the decision to volunteer enter the third phase of the Volunteer Life Cycle, which is the volunteer activity itself. During this phase, the volunteer performs the assigned role. For the 4-H agent, the focus shifts to education and management. There are many factors that influence the successful completion of a volunteer role. Specifically, there is a need to:

- Orient volunteers about Extension and their specific duties
- Train volunteers to increase their capacity and effectiveness
- Move volunteers from delegation to empowerment
- Recognize volunteers for their contributions
- Evaluate volunteers by focusing on results
- Sustain volunteer involvement (Boyce, 1971)

Commitment and Retention

The commitment and retention stage is where a volunteer compares their expectations for the volunteer role to the volunteer activity. Volunteer commitment and retention is the volunteer's perception of:

- The extent to which the 4-H agent managed and provided leadership to the volunteer
- The extent to which the volunteer activity provided benefits to the volunteer
- The extent to which the volunteer activity satisfied the volunteer

Research by Terry, Pracht, Fogarty, Pehlke, and Barnett (2013) suggests that retention is driven by volunteer satisfaction. Satisfaction is driven by the environment created by the 4-H agent and the benefits received by the volunteer. For more information about this study, please visit <https://archives.joe.org/joe/2013december/rb2.php>.

From a management perspective, recruiting a new volunteer takes more effort than maintaining a relationship with an existing volunteer. Volunteer commitment to the 4-H program is critical for efficiency, effectiveness, and program sustainability.

Conclusion

This EDIS publication provided an overview of the Volunteer Life Cycle model, described the four stages of the volunteer behavior, and identified volunteer management strategies for expanding volunteer involvement in 4-H Extension programs. Extension 4-H faculty can use the Volunteer Life Cycle model to understand volunteer behavior that leads to expanded involvement and increased volunteer commitment and retention.

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