

**Appendix to the March 2015 Hot Topic, Energize, Inc.
Do Volunteers Want to “Talk Amongst Themselves”?**
<https://www.energizeinc.com/hot-topics/2015/march>

Dan Berman’s 10 Real-Life Scenarios for Things Volunteers Might Want to Discuss with Other Volunteers

.... Maybe the best way of illustrating what I have in mind is by describing ten “real-life” scenarios, off the top of my head:

Scenario One:

“I’m a high school student (freshman or sophomore), thinking about doing some sort of volunteering. I’ve heard all kinds of rumors: ‘If you don’t volunteer at least x number of hours a week, you won’t get into a “top” school.’ ‘If you’re having any sort of challenges academically, you’re better off not putting any time into volunteering.’ ‘Some volunteer experiences can be really great but some can be terrible.’ I’d really like to find some place I could safely go to online at my convenience, to read what others are saying about these things and, when I feel comfortable enough doing more than just ‘lurking,’ posting my questions anonymously.” (There could be a sub-forum on volunteering for high school students.)

Scenario Two:

“I’m a 40-year-old who has been volunteering several hours a week ever since I was a teen. My spouse has been increasingly critical of my volunteering, saying that ‘charity begins at home.’ I find myself wondering whether there are others in my situation or who have been in my situation. I’d like to know how they are dealing or have dealt with this issue. The opportunity to feel this sense of community would mean a lot to me.”

Scenario Three:

“I’m a recent retiree, having just turned 65. All my life, I’ve fantasized about doing volunteer work and now I finally have the chance to actually do it. But I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed by all the options. I’ve been online and seen countless websites that are like search engines for service opportunities. But I haven’t come across any forums where I can talk about how these opportunities compare with each other. If I could post a question anonymously somewhere asking for help comparing Opportunity A with Opportunity B, especially from the perspective of fellow seniors, that would be extremely helpful.” (There could be a sub-form for seniors.)

Scenario Four:

“I’m a new college graduate who’s tried my hand at several different volunteer opportunities but for some reason, I didn’t get much of a sense of gratification from any of them. I’m starting to wonder whether I’m just not cut out for volunteering. Or maybe

I just haven't connected with the right activity. It would be great if I could see what other recent college grads who are volunteering think about this and what suggestions they might offer me. Maybe I could find inspiration by reading discussions about how others feel they are having successful experiences."

Scenario Five:

"I derive so much satisfaction from volunteering that I would really like to go beyond just doing what I do as a volunteer, to help inspire others. In fact, I have a personal story to tell. After the death of a loved one, I became extremely depressed, to the point of having suicidal thoughts. Somewhat by accident, I began doing volunteer work and it totally changed my perspective on life, bringing me out of my depression. I would like to share my story with others but I'm not very good at public speaking. I would feel comfortable going online and 'talking' about it, from the safety of my home." (There might be a sub-forum devoted to personal stories of an inspirational nature.)

Scenario Six:

"I really like the *idea* of volunteering but I'm not really much of a 'people person.' I've heard about something called 'online volunteering' and I'm wondering whether it's legit. I'd like to know: Are other people really doing this? What sorts of things do they do? How do they like it? Is it as flexible as it sounds? What are the best websites to use for this? A forum where I could see what other people are saying and ask my own questions would be very helpful. While I'm at the forum, I'll probably also check out what people are saying about non-online opportunities. Maybe that will even prompt me to consider a more traditional volunteer position." (There could be a sub-forum for online volunteering.)

Scenario Seven:

"I've always loved animals but my living situation right now doesn't allow for pets. It would be great to do something that involves contact with animals like working at a shelter but I'm a little concerned about getting scratched, bitten or infected by some animal-borne disease. Are these legitimate concerns or am I just 'paranoid'? I'd really like to ask people who work with animals about my concerns. If I got enough assurance from volunteers in this area, I would probably work up the courage to take the plunge and get started. But where can I go to have this discussion, in a context where I feel safe and completely comfortable?" (There could be a sub-forum for volunteering work relating to animals.)

Scenario Eight:

"I'm a program manager for volunteers. There are a number of forums I can access to discuss project and volunteer management with fellow managers but it would be very helpful to access a large forum populated by volunteers themselves, which I could utilize like a 'focus group,' to try out new ideas and get feedback on approaches that I would like to try, to enhance retention of volunteers, which is currently one of our major challenges. A general online forum populated by a large number of volunteers would

help to meet this need.” (The forum could offer a sub-forum for program managers, though that sub-forum would of course not serve as the “focus group.”)

Scenario Nine:

“I’m the parent of a child who is talking about volunteering in a developing country. With all the stories on the news lately about innocent volunteers being taken as hostages and then being imprisoned or worse, I’m very concerned for her safety. In fact, her mother and I are absolutely terrified. We don’t feel that the organization in question can be objective enough to reliably answer our questions and respond to our concerns. We would really like to communicate with others who have direct personal knowledge of what the situation is like for volunteers in that area. A discussion forum would be a great place to do that.”

Scenario Ten:

“I’m a reporter whose ‘beat’ is non-profits and volunteering. VolunteerTalk.org would be a great place for me to go, to keep abreast of trends and issues in this area, as well as to work up particular story ideas and even to locate interview subjects in a hurry. Fast and ready access to this material would not just benefit my publication and me but also, through more in-depth coverage and publicity, the cause of volunteering.” (One of the rules of the forum that anyone who registers must accept would be that reporters and researchers may not pose as volunteers.)

Dan adds:

I’m basing these concerns on what I’ve been exposed to over the years, through conversations, reports and readings. Three examples:

- In his 2003 book, *Make a Difference: America’s Guide to Volunteering*, author Arthur Blaustein quotes one student as saying, “Before I started tutoring, I was really scared” (page 5), after which the student goes on to explain the nature of those fears.
- One of Tobi Johnson’s 2011 blogs about volunteering is entitled, “10 Things Prospective Volunteers Worry about Before They Join.” Described within the blog as “10 big worries,” these include concerns such as: “Will I be comfortable?” “Will I fit in?” and “Will I be safe?”
- In a 2014 blog entitled “Challenges Faced by International Volunteers in China,” a program coordinator for Minds Abroad details some very serious potential pitfalls faced by international volunteers in China. She writes about fears on the part of prospective volunteers and emphasizes the importance of exchanging information with people who are capable of giving unbiased, third-party opinions.

The most successful online discussion groups I've observed over the years all feature a variety of subforums. One advantage of the umbrella concept is the SEO (search engine optimization) power that is leveraged this way: the subforums show up prominently in Google because of the "big tent" under which they appear. Another advantage is the cross-over opportunities that create synergism, as well as serendipity.

Let's say, for example, that a high schooler who originally visits the forum for information about volunteering opportunities for herself notices the subforum for seniors, which reminds her that lately a grandparent has been depressed. Clicking into that subforum, she arrives at the idea that a certain type of volunteering could benefit her depressed grandparent.

Along similar lines, the high school student who was originally drawn to VolunteerTalk.org for the subforum for high schoolers—or the grandparent who subsequently visits at the urging of his high school granddaughter, to tap into the subforum on seniors—might end up posting an inspirational story in that subforum, illustrating another instance of cross-over. And the inspirational stories, in turn, might generate discussion in the general forum.

Program managers (at least many of them) are certainly highly knowledgeable individuals, with many years or even decades of accumulated experience and expertise. Yet is it not possible that even they might learn something by observing frank discussions among volunteers in the general discussion area or one of the subforums? Is it not possible that they would “hear” things this way that they otherwise might not (and, in so doing, everyone would benefit)?

“The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This general principle has been observed in many contexts, one of which would be online discussion forums.

These thoughts have prompted me to think that an online discussion forum devoted to volunteers and volunteering might possibly end up making a positive contribution. And if there is any such possibility, it seems to me that this idea is at least worth trying.

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