

# New paradigm in volunteering: How organizations can adapt to 'neither-growing-nor-fading' brand relationships

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Researchers from Emlyon Business School and HEC Montreal published a new *Journal of Marketing* study that examines the new breed of

volunteers who often show a weaker sense of affiliation with organizations and how best to engage them for mutual benefit.

The study is titled "[Managing Brand Relationship Plurality: Insights from the Nonprofit Sector](#)" and is authored by Verena Gruber and Jonathan Deschênes.

Volunteers stand as vital pillars in the operation and survival of nonprofit organizations. Across the globe, over 850 million [volunteers](#) give their time to support a variety of causes, according to a 2021 report by United Nations Volunteers.

Traditionally, volunteers were thought to be motivated by the altruistic act of giving, and many chose nonprofits based on a strong sociocultural fit and personal convictions. However, volunteers now interact differently with brands in the [nonprofit sector](#).

Individuals devote fewer hours to their causes and want flexible schedules. They seek opportunities for [personal growth](#) and pick activities with potential work-related benefits. These new volunteers often show a weaker sense of affiliation with organizations.

This raises an important question: How can organizations effectively cultivate relationships with volunteers whose interests and motivations are shifting?

The study finds that entertaining more distant relationships can mutually benefit nonprofit organizations and volunteers. Drawing on an in-depth analysis of the Red Cross in Vienna, Austria, this research demonstrates that organizations can effectively manage both traditional and new types of volunteers by adopting tailored [relationship](#) management practices.

## **Relationship growth for traditional volunteers**

Nonprofit brands continue to need the vision, commitment, and initiative of traditional, growth-oriented volunteers who provide the backbone of organizational activities. To allow these relationships to thrive, managers should focus on a solid material presence.

Nonprofits should establish a physical infrastructure so that volunteers can gather, socialize, and bond. Managers should provide training and competence-building activities to assist the intensification of the brand relationship. They should supply branded clothing to facilitate easy visual identification of members and communicate with members by leveraging high-quality content such as exclusive print magazines.

In addition, managers need to carefully create documentation that clearly presents the brand's history and values as well as provide a comprehensive and clear description of what volunteering entails in terms of expectations and duties. Communicating a compelling narrative consistently throughout the volunteer's journey is crucial to sustain the path of growth and intensification.

These brand relationship practices will enable volunteers to ascend, over time, to strategic roles within the organization, including mentoring and training of future generations of volunteers. These growth-oriented volunteers, when supported with the right managerial practices, progressively become practice champions and thus constitute valuable assets for the organization.

## **Activating new volunteers**

New volunteers seek flexibility and opportunity; they help out when they have time and when the task fits their agenda. Adopting a pragmatic approach to the relationship is crucial for nonprofit organizations.

"This involves accepting a certain degree of distance to and from these volunteers, who may be less emotionally attached to the organization, and respecting their desire for intermittent engagement. What matters is not their unwavering loyalty but their existing skills," Gruber explains.

Consequently, the managerial focus needs to shift to acquiring and activating volunteers as needed. Organizations should initially build a diverse pool of volunteers whom they can subsequently activate as needed.

The key lies in utilizing systems to identify potential volunteers and communicate with those possessing desired characteristics for specific tasks. The integration of a mobile application could greatly facilitate this process.

Such practices will allow nonprofit organizations to deploy the right volunteers, in the right quantity, at the right time.

## **Lessons for managers**

Deschênes says that "our research offers insights for nonprofit managers grappling with the management of volunteer relationships. We show the value that lies in distant, non-escalating relationships when managed in symbiosis with classic growth-oriented relationships. Our results point to broader implications for brand relationship management, applicable to both nonprofit and for-profit entities."

Traditional volunteering mirrors consumer–brand relationships in which individuals develop strong ties with brands and often integrate in [brand](#) communities. This type of relationship permeates marketing and consumer studies. The new volunteers resemble consumers who maintain a more distant and seemingly disinterested relationship with brands that they consume sporadically but regularly, without a desire to intensify the

relationship.

The researchers call this a "Neither Growing nor Fading" (NGNF) relationship. NGNF relationships arguably represent a significant proportion of the interactions that consumers typically have with brands, yet there is little research to date that has focused on them.

Here are some strategies for managers to acquire and activate NGNF members:

- Actively embrace the new volunteering logic and accept that volunteers become dormant between activations.
- Develop partnerships with broadcasters to reach large audiences and communicate the organization's volunteering story and needs via [social media](#) to generate traffic on the organization's platforms.
- Know volunteer needs by identifying volunteer profiles for each specific volunteer job. Identify key skillset information to include in the registration form, such as education and training.
- Develop some material element to identify volunteers during their activation (light jackets, baseball caps, etc.). These materials could be lent to volunteers for the duration of their activation.

**More information:** Verena Gruber et al, EXPRESS: Managing Brand Relationship Plurality: Insights from the Non-profit Sector, *Journal of Marketing* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429241253193](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429241253193)

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